4
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

4
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

# Outbreak Company

## THE POWER OF MOE 4

Ichiro Sakaki Illustration Yuugen

# Contents

Chapter One:
The Melancholy
of an Empress

Chapter Two:
Magical Girl

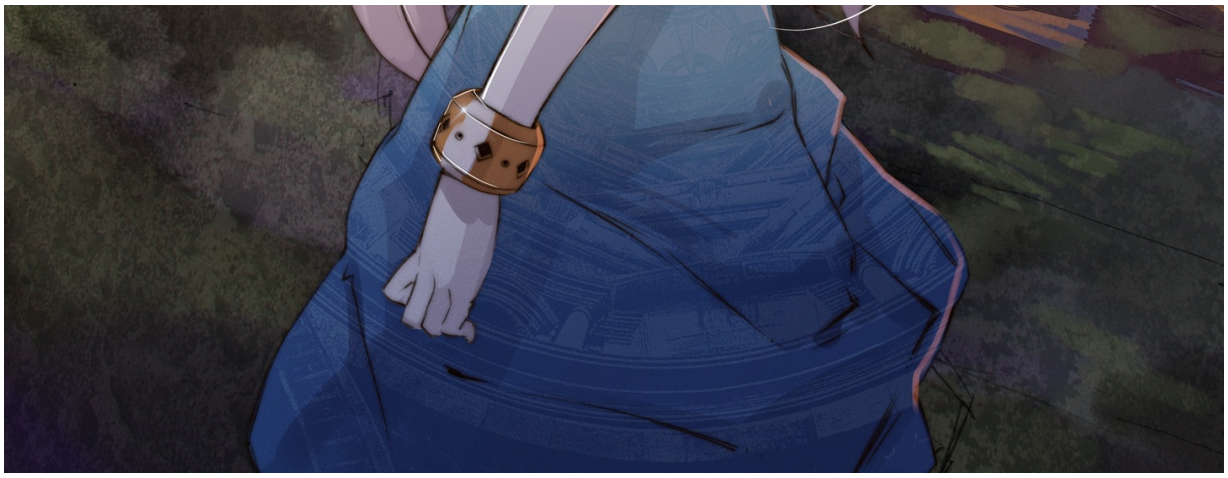
Chapter Three:
The Party's Over

Chapter Four:
No Business Like...

Afterword

Holy Eldant Empress—Petralka an Eldant III
"Ah. You've come at a good moment, Shinichi."
Amutech In-house Artist — Elvia Harneiman, Werewolf
"You here to change too, Shinichi-sama?"
Amutech General Manager — Kanou Shinichi
"—?!" "—?!"
Eldant Maid Girl — Myusel Fourant
"M-Master!"
REC
REC
自宅警備
Shirt: Home Security Guard

“It is as you said — we feel we have taken on a different self.”



# Chapter One: The Melancholy of an Empress

I, Kanou Shinichi, want to shout it from the rooftops:

*Maid uniforms are good!*

*They are very, very good!*

"Boo....."

There isn't really a settled definition of a maid uniform. To say that it's the uniform a maid wears might seem tautological, but it's also completely true. Granted, we have things like sailor uniforms, which started as the outfits worn by sailors but now, at least in Japan, have practically become synonymous with female students. Do me a favor and just forget about all that.

I think the ensemble most people picture when they think of a maid is something like this: a black or dark-blue one-piece dress, a frilly apron, and maybe a headpiece (also frilly).

And that's about right. It has a functional beauty—totally without ostentation, yet never in danger of being plain. Its very purposefulness is what makes it attractive.

"Booooooo....."

But in the modern age, and especially in Japan, maid uniforms are first and foremost cosplay.

They might come in pink or light blue, for example. The skirt might only go down to the thighs, to be combined with high socks. They might be sleeveless. They're all *about* ostentation, excess, trying anything and everything.

Of course, as an otaku who prided himself on his wide-ranging tastes, I loved a good cosplay maid. It was everything I could want. Especially that absolute territory peeking out from between her socks and skirt, like a battle line between innocence and temptation... It's art. Just the socks alone, working their way up her thighs, were enough to set my head spinning.

“Booooooooooo.....”

And yet—and yet!

Does that mean I thought we should pretend as if maid uniforms intended for actual maid work don’t exist? Hardly! We can’t forget our roots—don’t you agree?!

Especially... the color. Dark tones (black being representative) make a person look thinner. Then there’s the whiteness of the apron contrasting with the dark uniform! That’s crucial! The white speaks to the innocence of a young maiden; it’s the one thing about a maid on which I absolutely refuse to compromise!

These uniforms are fundamentally different from outfits whose main appeal is how much skin they show. Praise ye the maid! Venerate her uniform! It is no mere knee-jerk reaction against sexual desire—it presents a panoply of metaphors, creating drama within all who see it. What greater degree of moe could there be?!

“Booooooooooooooooo.....!”

And so on and so forth.

“Booooooooooooooooooooooooo.....!”

Such nuanced and perceptive appraisals—

“Booooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.....!”

—were completely absent from my mind at that moment.

I was entirely at the mercy of the whirlwind of emotion that welled up within me. I could only lift my voice in admiration.

What a... What a... *chest*!!

It had just been a morning like any other, and I had just been walking down the hallway of my mansion, when suddenly I heard a door open. And when I looked over—

“Booooooo.....ooo! Booooooooooo.....bs!”

It was like an orchard of peaches, a paradise.

Yes! Two rich, juicy peaches right there! Hidden from me only by a white apron and a navy dress. You could practically smell them! They practically cried, *Look at us!* Two great hills that strived against the fabric entrapping them, as if they might burst through it at any time. So round and perfect! O! O! They weren’t just big, but were flawless in the arc they described...

In the name of all that is good, praise these twin hills!

Sieg—*OPPAI*!!

"Shinichi-kun?" As I stood there shaking with gratitude, I heard a dubious voice. "What are you doing?"

"I'm worshiping," I said, pressing my hands firmly together.

*Oh thank you, thank you!*

Such vast boobs were a dream come true. Boobs are love. Boobs are life.

Worship them properly, and be assured that your life will be extended by a thousand days.

“Worshiping what, exactly?”

“What else! These generous, jiggling, truly scandalous—”

That was as far as I got before, blinking—and with a great deal of effort—I succeeded in raising my eyes from her chest to her face.

“Oh, hey. It’s you, Minori-san.”

“So you didn’t even glance at my face first, huh?” the black-haired maid said in exasperation.

The woman in front of me could have passed for a teenager, but she was actually in her early twenties—a real babyface. She had nice, symmetrical features, but there was a rounded quality to her face that made her seem less beautiful than cute. The big, watery eyes lurking behind her glasses contributed to the effect.

“What? Hardly. Perish the thought. Of course I, uh—” I raised my right hand as if to emphasize my truthfulness. I decided this would be a good moment for a proper greeting. “Good morning, Minori-san.”

Her name was Koganuma Minori-san. You might say she was your archetypical warm and fuzzy type: she looked very kind and in fact was quite good at taking care of people. Her occupation, though? She was a WAC, a female member of the Japan Self-Defense Force. She was living in this mansion as my bodyguard.

We were pretty much wacky housemates!

“I didn’t recognize you at first.”

I really hadn’t. Minori-san normally wore her JSDF uniform: a shirt, tight skirt, and a necktie for fashion. An outfit that basically screamed, *I’m a member of the armed forces!* She sometimes changed into work clothes when there was physical labor to be done, but now that I thought about it, I had never seen Minori-san in civilian attire.

Hence, my image of Minori-san went hand-in-hand with her military uniform. For her to suddenly show up in a maid outfit—how could I not be a little *Huh? Who’s that?* It wasn’t like I was constantly staring at her chest all the time. Mostly.

Plus, today, Minori-san had her hair down.

Normally, she always kept her hair tied back in a bun. It was probably a lot easier to move that way, but it also meant that at a glance, it could look like she had boyishly short hair. Yet this morning, her hair fell to just below her shoulders.

Taken all together, along with her glasses, she suddenly gave the impression of a very mature woman—someone graceful and ladylike. I know they say women are masters of disguise, but she was *totally* different today. And on top of all of that, she was wearing a maid uniform. The picture of innocence was complete.

I guess you could say it was the moe of the unexpected.

I was so used to seeing her in her formal outfit that now her breasts just... called to me. It was like... Oh, I know. It was like when you see a normally boyish girl put on a cute dress and your heart starts pounding.

"What's with the outfit?" I asked.

"Oh... Uh," Minori-san replied, smiling shyly and scratching her cheek in embarrassment.

*Ooh!* The gesture itself seemed fresh and adorable. Even though I know those aren't words you would normally use to praise a woman older than yourself.

"Myusel and Cerise just... you know."

Myusel. Cerise. They were the two actual maids currently employed at our household. Originally it had just been Myusel alone, but the way things turned out, she ended up very busy, and we decided to hire a second maid. That was Cerise.

Myusel could sometimes be a little hasty; she was sort of the "clumsy girl" type. Cerise, however, wasn't yet used to maid work—or more accurately, human life in general—and she had a tendency to mess up periodically. And if they both happened to have trouble at once, it could turn into a bit of a thing.

To take a recent example...

Mistake number one: Myusel puts all of Minori-san's clothes in the wash at once.

Mistake number two: Cerise accidentally spills the water from a vase on Minori-san.

This clumsy combo meant Minori-san's one set of dry clothes—the ones she was wearing—were done for. Anyway, I gathered that was what had happened. Cerise was someone's wife, so you'd think—but forget about that.

"And I had to wear *something* until my clothes dried..."

"But this uniform," I said. "It's not Myusel's, is it?"

“It is. The uniform she wears—I guess it’s not actually her own.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a work uniform. Provided by her employer, just like my army uniform.”

“Ah...”

Now I got it.

Although, practically speaking, this was my house, the mansion was actually the property of the Holy Eldant Empire—in other words, the state. I was just renting it from them. And to my surprise, the house came with a maid and even a gardener. So it made sense that a maid uniform would be treated as necessary equipment.

“Come to think of it, Cerise wears one with a slightly different design, doesn’t she?”

“Well, everything about her is a bit different, including her body type,” Minori-san said.

In other words, it appeared there was a range of maid outfits in different styles and sizes kept here at the mansion. Minori-san was simply wearing one of them.

“I kind of like how it’s different from Myusel’s,” I said. “Very chic.”

“It’s a little tight,” Minori-san said.

She was right: it wasn’t exactly a size too small or anything, but it did look a bit constraining. The dress buttoned all the way up to the collar, and it looked... well, heavy. Kind of “gothic” style. And in Minori-san’s case, it barely fit around her chest—the fabric seemed near to bursting. Despite how little skin she was showing, the effect was strangely erotic.

Inside, I was deeply grateful to Myusel and Cerise for making such excellent mistakes.

“I just can’t keep this skirt down,” Minori-san said, “and it really is a little too small to move comfortably. I’d like to change into something else, or maybe go get some of my laundry, even if it isn’t completely dry yet.”

And that, it seemed, was what she had been on her way to do when she had come out of her room and run smack into me.

Despite all that, though...

“You know, it really does look good on you.”

“Try not to look at my chest when you say that.”

“Pardon me very much,” I said, adjusting my gaze upward. “I mean it,

though. You look good.” This was the honest truth; I meant exactly what I said. “You could get away with wearing that. You know, just around the house.”

Maybe Minori-san always wore her JSDF uniform because she was, technically, always on the job. She was supposed to be guarding me 24/7/365.

But still, maybe she could wear something more normal, even if only when she was at home.

Minori-san, however, looked away from me and said inarticulately, “Yeah, well... I don’t know about that...”

I gave her a questioning look. What was wrong? This wasn’t like her at all. Curious, I tried to look her in the face—but my eyes naturally started to wander downward to the swell below her neck. No! It’s not like that. I swear I’m not doing it on purpose—for the most part! But it’s still not like that! It’s just those boobs! Those boobs are *right there*...!

*Bam!*

I heard some kind of popping sound. Minori-san let out a voiceless sound of surprise. At the same moment, I felt pain assault my face—my eyes, in fact.

“My eyes! My eyes!”

I learned later that it was the buttons from the uniform. No longer able to withstand the strain of Minori-san’s prodigious chest, they had popped off and gone flying... straight at me, who happened to be looking directly at them.

What divine punishment! What karmic retribution!

“Sh-Shinichi-kun! Are you okay?”

“My eyes! My eyeeees!” I kept repeating, like the awful loli-con villain out of a certain nameless anime. Thankfully, Minori-san was kind enough not to intone some spell of destruction like “ba**e!”, but came to my aid instead.

“My eyes—eeyikes!”

“Wha—hey!”

As I flailed about, mad with pain, I slipped and fell—taking Minori-san with me.

Under normal circumstances, I'm sure Minori-san would have caught me. She might be a girl, but she was a heck of a lot stronger than a former home security guard like me, and had better reflexes. But now she was in an unfamiliar outfit. Plus, she was trying to cover her chest, off of which all the buttons had summarily popped. It wasn't the most conducive situation to moving freely.

I thrust my hands out instinctively, ready for an unpleasant collision with the floor—but my face and the back of my head both got away without a pounding.

*It's... It's so soft!*

Something, some soft thing, stopped my face. *Could this... Could this be? It couldn't be! No way! No wayayayayayayayayayay* (Linguistic faculties short-circuited by excitement. Please stand by.)

"Eyow-ow..."

"Are you a-all right?"

I came back to myself and quickly opened my eyes. My vision was blurred with tears, but at least it seemed I was still able to see.

And the first thing I saw was... well, exactly what I expected.

"Whoa!"

A chest!

And because her dress was nearly popping off, Minori-san was desperately holding it down with her arm, which caused her boobs to squish in a way that made them look extra, extra cushy, as if they were exclaiming, *Squeeze us! Squeeeeeze u—*

No! Now was *not* the time!

*Hold on, wait just a second. Is Minori-san not wearing...?!*

Could Myusel have accidentally washed *all* of Minori-san's clothes at once?

Ahhh! Myusel! Myusel! Good job! Excellent work!

*Stop that! This isn't the time to be overflowing with praise for my clumsy maid.*

"Shinichi-kun?!"

"S-Sorry about that!"

I rushed to get off of Minori-san. But as if she had been waiting for that exact moment—

"M-Master?"

Her voice sounded deeply shaken.

I unconsciously froze.

Let's review the situation Minori-san and I were in. She was lying on the floor—in a maid outfit with no buttons, not to mention her girls were running free. And then there was me, not only on top of her but with my face buried in her chest.

No matter who stumbled on us like this, their conclusion was likely to be the same: I had shoved Minori-san to the ground and was trying to do something unspeakable to her.

I was sorely tempted to just put my head back down and try to escape reality—but I knew better than that. With a great deal of effort, I turned around.

Myusel was standing there, looking as shaken as she sounded. And then there was Elvia, her eyes wide as if she was seeing something incredible.

Myusel Fourant: the half-elf girl who was a maid here.

And Elvia Harneiman: a werewolf girl and self-proclaimed wandering artist.

Both of them lived here in the mansion.

"Shinichi-sama—" Elvia's animal ears and tail wiggled a little bit. Was she shocked or sort of... admiring? "Is it... 'that day'?"

"It is not!" I almost screamed.

The "day" the beast girl was referring to wasn't exactly the same as a human girl's "day." Instead it was a once-a-month period of being in heat. That period had caused me more than a little trouble not long ago. Was she implying that beast-person males experienced it as well? It seemed like that would make things awfully chaotic...

Okay, forget about that.

Myusel looked away from us as if to say she couldn't stand to see any more, then spun on her heel and rushed out into the hallway.

"M-Myusel, wait!" I reached out after her rapidly vanishing form. "This is all a mistake! A mistaaaake!"

She turned a corner somewhere down the hallway and disappeared. I watched her go with a sinking feeling, while in a corner of my mind my internal monologue observed, with surprising objectivity, that I had said something very similar not that long ago.

My name is Kanou Shinichi. My dad is a light novel author and my mom is an ero-game writer-illustrator, so you could say I have two sets of otaku genes. About a year after I switched classes from average high-schooler to home security guard on account of being shot down when I confessed my love for my childhood friend, my parents ran out of patience and told me that I could either get back to school, get a job, or get the hell out of their house. Cornered, I started looking for work, and the work I found—well, let's say it wasn't the usual.

Specifically, I became the general manager of a company operating in another world.

If I tried to explain it like that to most people, they would probably wonder what I was talking about—and if I was in my right mind. But I swear I'm not insane. I think.

That's right: I'm in another world. A genuine *isekai*. The sort of place I always thought only existed in SF and fantasy novels.

What's the story? Well, at Aokigahara (a.k.a. Mt. Fuji's "Sea of Trees"), the place that's famous for suicides, they found this hole. We didn't understand even the most basic things about it: how it got there or how long it had been there. No one even really knew what it was.

The only thing we figured out (so I'm told) was that the hole was some sort of hyperspace tunnel leading to a world entirely different from Earth.

You could say this was good luck, of a sort. I mean, what if it had led to outer space, or straight to the Earth's mantle, or into the Schwarzchild radius of a black hole? The day the hyperspace tunnel opened could have been the last day Earth existed.

Anyway...

To make a long story short, the Japanese government secretly investigated the hole, and they discovered beings much like themselves on the other side. That is to say, there were humans here who had organized themselves into nations.

The government higher-ups may (or may not) have thought that fellow humans would be easier to deal with than outright aliens, but in any event, they sent a small cadre of researchers and planners to open intercourse with

this world under a veil of utmost secrecy. Eventually, Japan succeeded in establishing a certain level of diplomacy. All of this without any foreign country or even most people in Japan ever finding out.

Of course, the government had good reason to keep this discovery secret.

We were talking about another world, here. One that, investigation revealed, was at a technological level roughly equivalent to Middle Ages Europe in our own world.

Did that mean that all the resources we were worried about running out of on "our side" might be found there? Did it mean there might be untouched precious minerals or biological resources of kinds we had never even encountered? Maybe it even meant that in the future, this newly discovered world would be a source of labor and a new market.

If any of these very attractive possibilities proved true, Japan wanted an exclusive claim on them, and that meant keeping the hole, and the world on the other side of it, absolutely secret.

As it happened, the very first expected hurdle—communication—was quickly overcome when it turned out the unique magic here allowed people to understand each other well enough to get along.

The problems started after that.

They had managed to make first contact, and even to communicate successfully. But they just couldn't seem to get any further than that.

*Actually... that sounds like a lot of romantic relationships I've heard about...*

Japan just couldn't find a way to increase its Affinity with the new country it had discovered, the Holy Eldant Empire.

After all—not to be repetitive, but this was a nation in a completely different world that they were dealing with. It had a history and culture completely distinct from Japan's, which meant the things its people were interested in were different too.

Differing systems of currency made economic exchange hard, so it wasn't really possible just to buy their interest. Japan could offer goods in kind instead, but if they weren't careful, their new friends might realize Japan was just after fresh resources. Above all, the hyperspace tunnel wasn't big enough to allow for the transportation of large volumes of material—not to mention that pouring too much down the hole might attract

the attention of foreign nations.

So it had to be something you could carry across.

Something harmless.

And, ideally, cheap.

Hey! What about traditional Japanese craft products, then?

It turned out they didn't make much sense to the Eldant Empire, and weren't well received.

At the end of its rope, Japan tried everything it could think of. And wouldn't you know it—the thing that got the best response from the Eldant people was Japanese subculture entertainment. In other words, otaku stuff like manga and anime.

Fair enough. The Japanese government resolved to conduct diplomacy with the Empire via a trade policy focused on otaku culture. The first step in this plan was to establish Amutech, General Entertainment Company, in this alternate world. It was actually funded jointly by Japan and the Eldant government.

That was all well and good, but exactly what works should they bring over here?

The Japanese government was bereft of anyone with the sense to judge such a thing. Theoretically, there were a few measurements they could have used, but when the government gets involved with subculture, bad things tend to happen. They just think too bureaucratically, or maybe it's the top-down approach to something the brass considers beneath them. Whatever the case, even the government officials seemed to realize they were asking for trouble.

It became their mission to find someone with the subjective sense to make these calls. It would be best if it were someone who was readily expendable if things went south. And by a series of coincidences, the person they chose—by which I mean the person they forcibly dragged off to the Holy Eldant Empire—was me, now *former* home security guard Kanou Shinichi.

I liked us all to eat together as much as possible.

I guess it wasn't exactly what you would call a corporate policy of Amutech, but it was a practice I liked to encourage in the mansion I was renting. It was my call; apparently, it wasn't typical in the Eldant Empire, but that didn't bother me.

"Bon appétit!" I clapped my hands together and then reached out for my knife and fork. Everyone else, all five of them, took my words as the signal to start eating.

By the way, although I liked us to eat together, the food we were eating varied from person to person. This had less to do with "favorite foods" and more to do with racial differences. A quick census of our breakfast table showed we had people of four different races eating together—human, half-elf, lizardman, and werewolf. And biologically, each species was a little bit different.

As you might imagine, this made food preparation a pretty serious task.

"Do you like it, Master?" Myusel asked, cocking her head like a sparrow. She sat beside me, her flaxen hair tied into a ponytail. She was wearing a maid outfit—as that suggested, she worked in this mansion as a maid. In fact, it was usually her job to make breakfast. It had to be a lot of trouble to prepare meals that were to each person's taste, and a little different each day, but she did an exemplary job and never complained.

"It's delicious." I smiled, wolfing down my food.

To top it all off, Myusel was an excellent cook. This was the first time I had eaten a girl's homemade cooking (I have a younger sister, incidentally, but Shizuki never once showed any interest in anything resembling cooking), so it's entirely possible my perceptions were colored by the moe-ness of it, but Minori-san and Elvia seemed to agree that the food was good, so it probably really was.

"That's wonderful," Myusel said, a happy grin spreading over her face.

*Ahhhh!*

An energetic and beautiful young woman whose joy and sorrow followed from my every word! And she was a maid *and* a half-elf! What a dramatic overachiever! We had been living together for more than six months now, but every single day at breakfast I thought I might die from the moe.

I had been worried that the whole thing with Minori-san earlier might have left a bad taste in Myusel's mouth, but it didn't look like she was

remotely worried about it. Still, I would have to be sure to clear things up with her later, just because.

It was a relief, though.

“Um...” But it was Myusel who spoke up first, a cloud passing over her face. “I’m... very sorry about earlier.”

“Huh?”

I froze. When she said *earlier*, she could only mean the ruckus in the hallway. But what did she have to apologize for?

“I was just... so surprised, I left without asking for permission...”

“Huh? Whoa, whoa, whoa. You’re fine!” I said quickly. “Just, don’t get the wrong idea. Please?”

“The... The wrong idea?” Myusel said hesitantly.

“I mean, Minori-san and I aren’t— we weren’t—”

“I think he’s trying to say they weren’t copulating,” interjected the beast girl on the other side of me. Had her comment just saved my skin or doomed me?

The beast girl was Elvia Harneiman. As I’ve mentioned, she was a demi-human with animal ears and a tail. Pretty much literally a werewolf.

She claimed to be an itinerant artist, but it turned out she was actually a spy sent to the Eldant Empire by the neighboring kingdom of Bahairam. Normally, given that this was a Middle Ages-type world where the main thing people wanted to know about human rights was whether they were edible, the punishment for spying would be immediate execution. But... well, let’s just say it’s complicated, but Elvia was now under my care as our resident illustrator.

So now you’re up to speed.

Elvia was generally affable, a typical cute beast girl, and that was all well and good—but she could also be a little rough around the edges. Sometimes I wished she would be just a little more sensitive to the mood in a room when she spoke.

“C-C-Copula—!”

There, see? Myusel was left speechless again. Her skin, white as a pearl, had gone red with embarrassment, and although it was adorable, Elvia’s unfortunate choice of words threatened to make things much more awkward than they needed to be.

“Elvia...”

“Aw, I was a li’l surprised at first, too,” she said, and then she laughed. Unlike Myusel, she had stuck around, and as a result had a pretty good idea of what had actually happened.

“What is it you’re talking about?”

The question came from my left, where Brooke was seated. Brooke Darwin. He was a servant—really, the groundskeeper—at this house, and he was a lizardman.

As a demi-human, he was technically in the same category as Elvia, but whereas werewolves looked a lot like people who just happen to have fuzzy ears and tails, lizardmen were exactly the opposite. They may have had a basically humanoid shape, but mostly they looked (you guessed it) like lizards. Conical facial structure, big jaws, scaly reptilian skin. The sort of creature kids might imagine hiding under their beds.

Naturally, lizardman expressions were almost unreadable, and their speech always sounded oddly slow, so it could be hard to guess what they were thinking.

Nonetheless, at heart Brooke was a really decent guy, and I knew well that despite being a reptile he could act very “hot-blooded.” Recently he had begun to open up a little, and would even join the breakfast conversation from time to time.

“Er, actually—”

“This morning Shinichi-sama jumped Minori-sama in the hallway!”

“Elvia!!”

How could she sound so pleased with herself when she was making an announcement practically calculated to cause misunderstanding?

“I told you, it was all a mistake!” I said in a panic. “It just so happened that I was staring at Minori-san’s chest and her buttons—wait! Let me start that again!”

“Uh-huh...” Brooke nodded his long head slightly. For better or for worse, I couldn’t tell if it was a gesture of surprise or exasperation.

“It’s a mistake, I swear,” I said. “I mean, yes, I did push her over, that’s true, I can’t deny it, but—an accident! It was an accident!”

I was desperate to get the words out of my mouth. Somehow being stared at by Brooke’s lidless eyes made me blather; it was as though his gaze made even the slightest shred of guilt on my conscience multiply until it became impossible to bear. I mean, not that I had a guilty conscience! Not

at all!

Finally, Brooke nodded. “I understand, Master. You want Minori-san t’ bear your eggs.”

“I really *don’t* think you understand, Brooke!”

Actually, I had been under the impression that Brooke and I had managed to connect with each other to a certain extent—but maybe I had been imagining things.

“Oh...”

“He’s right, Brooke,” said our other maid from across the table. “Humans don’t lay eggs.”

Nobody spoke. She was right, as far as it went.

Now, I use the word “maid,” but I doubt you’re imagining exactly who was sitting at my table. For starters, maids don’t usually have scales.

Yes: sitting across from Brooke was another lizardman.

Cerise Darwin, Brooke’s wife.

Being female, she was physically smaller than Brooke, but she was still a lizardman. Let’s just say a maid outfit didn’t look quite right on her. Not only was her body the wrong shape for it, but the intimidating cast of her face made the uniform seem altogether inappropriate. (I understand this may not sound like the politest thing to say about Cerise.)

“I see. Yes, you’re right.”

“Indeed,” Cerise said, and she and Brooke nodded at each other. “By the way, Brooke, would you like another apple?”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit.”

“Here you are.”

*Gosh, it’s like they’re off in their own little world.*

Their faces looked about as distinguishable to me as two statues, but they projected a bubble of genuine friendship with a diameter of about two meters. I was certainly glad that Brooke and his wife seemed to be happy together, but the whole “Look at us get along!” thing was just... you know.

...Who’s jealous? I’m not jealous. I’m definitely not thinking: *You can take your dumb, fulfilled life and—and blow it up! Blow it all up!* I am not thinking that even for a second. *Lonely?* The word isn’t even in my vocabulary.

“Look, that’s not the point,” I said, waving my hands. “The whole idea that I shoved her over is a mistake! When I fell over, I just happened to take

her with me! Honest! Minori-san? Come on, back me up!" I turned to my alleged partner in crime, looking for support.

Incidentally, Minori-san had changed back into her usual outfit. It was still a bit damp, but it would hardly do for her to keep destroying Myusel's uniforms.

I had to admit, it was a real shame. She had looked awfully good in that outfit.

"How about you take a deep breath and calm down?" Minori-san said with a grin. "When you protest too much, you start to look pretty suspicious."

"Erk... But..."

"Oh, but Minori-sama," Elvia said eagerly, "it may've been an accident, but you didn't look too unhappy."

"I guess not," Minori-san said with a slight smile, the picture of composure. "That's the first time anything like that has ever happened to me, and it was definitely a surprise. But it sort of helped me understand how it feels to 'bottom,' and that's important knowledge for someone like me. But yes, it was an accident, and no one has to worry about it."

*Phew. How adult.*

Wait, though... What was that about bottoming?

I had pretty much straight-up sexually harassed her, and she was going to pass it off by looking at it like that? The fujoshi mind was opaque to me..... Hey.

Something suddenly occurred to me.

"Ahem. Minori-san?"

"Yes?"

"Do you mean you don't have a boyfriend?"

"I'm a boyfriendless wonder of an old maid of a spinster, yes. What about it?"

"Er, nothing." She was awfully forthright about it. "I'm just surprised. You seem like someone who'd be really popular."

"Maybe you could not stare at my chest while you say that."

"Sorry."

*But that's where the* boobs *are!*

"I just mean, you must have met lots of nice guys, notwithstanding home security guards like me."

“Hrmm... Well...”

I don’t mean to make this entirely about her chest. Minori-san had a really pretty face, too. Kind of childish and cute. When combined with her modest, restrained expressions, it was really moe. It gave the sense that being with her would be really... comfortable, I guess. Healing. I had to think there were plenty of guys who would go for someone like that.

I knew there were lots more men than women in the military, too, so I assumed that if anything, Minori-san would be flooded with suitors, so many that it would actually become a problem. Maybe she just had really high standards or something?

“Minori-san, is your type—”

“Oh, say, Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san jumped in, ruthlessly changing the subject. Hey—was she dodging me? “You’re going to the castle today, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, I think so...”

“Cool. Well, I’ve got to go get ready, then. Breakfast was great! Sorry to eat and run.”

She stopped eating and stood up. I could see she still had some food left. Not enough to warrant a “How can you waste that?” but pretty unusual for someone who was normally as thorough cleaning her plate as Minori-san was.

*Maybe she really was trying to avoid that question*, I thought distantly as I watched her leave the room.

Then again, she seemed to have some interest in love as a topic of discussion—or at least, she wasn’t above teasing me and Myusel or Elvia. That meant the subject wasn’t completely off-limits.

Was she just uncomfortable being the center of attention when it came to that? Could she be one of those girls who looked all mature on the outside, but way deep-down was an inexperienced, shy maiden?

*Oh, man. That is wicked moe.*

As I sat there thinking my usual ridiculous thoughts, I decided for the time being to focus on the breakfast in front of me.

The Holy Eldant Empire.

As I explained earlier, this other-world nation was the entity with which I was to do commerce.

The Eldant Empire, it seemed, was a large country even by the standards of this world, which was rife with multiethnic and military states. As the name suggested, it was run under an imperial system, meaning power was located with an emperor or empress.

In this case, it was the latter—specifically, Petralka an Eldant III, the current head of state.

I know the words *Imperial Majesty* can conjure up images of a beard-stroking old man, but Petralka was as far from that picture as you could get. She was young—in fact, she practically looked like a little girl. Her actual age wasn't so different from mine, but her youthful appearance rendered her adorable; she looked like she could just put on a little backpack and trundle off to school. Yet she was the ruler of this nation.

She wasn't just cute, either. She was also genuinely beautiful, startlingly so. Her long silver hair and big, green eyes evoked jewels, while her neat facial features were the picture of well-born class. Truly, her beauty exemplified what it means to be of noble birth. The tiaras and dresses she was frequently outfitted in never appeared to "wear her"; in fact, on her, they looked completely natural.

You could almost say she looked like one of those big antique dolls—it was almost hard to believe she breathed the same air and ate the same food as the rest of humanity. Sometimes you hear it said that an emperor isn't defiled by natural human bodily functions. With Petralka, you could almost believe it.

Anyway—

It was part of my job to go see that empress once every three days. Amutech, the general entertainment company that I worked for, was a joint venture between Japan and the Holy Eldant Empire, so Petralka was, in a sense, my boss. I had an obligation to let her know how business was going. Then again, to be honest, I probably would have gone to see her periodically even without that duty. Professional relationship aside, I considered Petralka a friend.

"We're here," Minori-san said, glancing out the window.

We thanked our coachman and climbed out of the winged carriage.

(That's what they called the form of transportation we were in: a carriage pulled not by a horse, but by a horse-sized, bipedal, flightless bird.)

For the record, Myusel had come with me and Minori-san as well. Despite the yawning chasm in their social statuses, an unusual series of events had led to Myusel and Petralka becoming friends. Plus, after our meeting with Her Majesty, I would be presenting Myusel as a teacher at the school where we taught Japanese otaku culture—so it made sense for her to come with us.

Myusel's Japanese was now good enough that she could teach at our school, in part because we were living together. In light of her upcoming employment, I had been having her visit the place more and more often.

"Man... No matter how many times I see it, I never get used to it," I said.

"I know what you mean." Minori-san nodded.

Towering before us was the empress's official residence—Eldant's imperial castle. We frequently describe huge things as "mountainous," but with Eldant Castle, that was no exaggeration. It wasn't even a metaphor. It was literally true. The castle had been created by hollowing out a mountain. It was so big that when you stood at the gate, you couldn't see the entire building.

It was less a piece of architecture than a geographical feature.

We have incredible feats of construction on Earth, too; stuff like the Great Wall of China. But let's be honest: it may be really long, but it's still just a wall. Pretty much nothing more than a line. This castle, though, was a huge hunk of material. It was overwhelming just to look at it. You could practically see the sound effect in the background: *dooon* (*looooooom*).

"Shall we?"

We stopped gazing up at the castle spires and proceeded through the gate.

Normally, this was where we would exchange a glance and a nod with the knights who had been posted as guards.

But today, the usual spots to the left and right of the gate were empty.

"Huh? Are they on vacation?"

"I don't think that's how it works," Minori-san said.

"Yeah... You're probably right."

But then where had they gone?

I had let the castle know ahead of time that I was coming, and by now I

was a familiar face there, so it shouldn't have really been a problem for me just to go on inside—but just wandering in didn't feel quite right. On the off chance there were any problems, blame would fall not only on me, but on the guards. If I made a wrong move, I could get us all in life-changing trouble.

"So what do we do?" I said.

"Hmmm..." Even Minori-san didn't seem quite able to come to a decision.

The three of us were standing there by the gate when Myusel called out, "Master."

I looked where she was pointing and saw a single figure coming towards us. Someone I recognized. I waved at him.

"Prime Minister Zahar!"

The prime minister was one of Petralka's closest advisors. He was a thin old man with white hair and a white beard. In addition to advising the empress on politics and economics, he appeared to be responsible for educational matters, too. In video games and manga, the prime minister is all too often depicted as secretly evil, a villain trying to control the government for his own ends—but Zahar came across almost like a doting butler looking after a young mistress.

"Gracious, do pardon me," Prime Minister Zahar said. "I'm very sorry to have kept you waiting." He bowed his head.

"Oh, not at all," I said, waving his apology away.

Apparently, we just had bad timing. I was about to set off in the direction of the audience chamber when Prime Minister Zahar called, "Shinichi-dono. Please wait. I deeply regret your having to come all the way here, but... for today, I must ask you to go back home."

"Sorry...?" I said dumbly. I definitely hadn't expected this. "Is—Is something wrong?"

"Well..." Zahar looked away from me. It looked like there was something that wasn't easy for him to say.

At that moment, I saw two knights coming at a run from the opposite direction of the prime minister. And that wasn't all. I saw another two knights coming from yet another direction.

Everyone looked like they were in a real hurry, not to say panicked.

The four knights came to a halt not far from us.

“Have you found her?” Prime Minister Zahar demanded. But the knights all shook their heads. “Then keep looking!”

“Yes, sir!” they responded, and rushed back off in the directions they had come.

What in the world was going on? It looked like things were awfully busy around here.

After a very long pause, Zahar heaved a sigh and said, “As a matter of fact...” He seemed to have decided that it was no use hiding it. Keeping secrets would only invite wild speculation.

“Her Majesty the Empress has been missing since this morning,” he said.

“Excuse me? Missing?”

“When a serving girl entered the royal bedchamber to bring breakfast this morning, she couldn’t find Her Majesty anywhere. At the moment, we have every single person in the castle looking for her.”

“There’s no chance she was carried off by someone, is there?” Minori-san asked, her expression hard.

It was a reasonable question. Petralka had once been held hostage by a rebel group. She had somehow managed to emerge unscathed, but if things had gone even slightly differently, she might have been killed. In any event, anyone as important as her was likely to be the target of would-be troublemakers.

But the Prime Minister said confidently, “No, I’m sure that’s not the case. There were indications that she ran away of her own free will.”

“Wh-What kind of ‘indications’?”

I was picturing a braided rope of sheets and curtains hanging out the window. It certainly happened often enough in manga and anime, but I wasn’t sure it was possible in real life.

“Can’t you use magic to find her?” Minori-san asked.

That’s right: in this country—indeed, in this world—magic was real, and very convenient. I mean, it could help bridge two languages and civilizations via telepathy with nothing more than a ring (or more accurately, two rings). It seemed like it had to be easy enough to find one missing girl.

Zahar, however, shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “Her Majesty always has magic-resistant diagrams on her person...”

“Oh.” We all looked at each other.

This went back to that thing I mentioned: when the empress was captured by rebels. Minori-san, Myusel, and I were all there—and we had all seen a burst of offensive magic used by one of the terrorists simply bounce off Petralka.

Petralka herself told us then that given the constant danger of assassination, she had magical diagrams that would reflect or negate any spells that targeted her. I certainly didn’t know the details, but apparently it wouldn’t just nullify attack magic, but spells intended to locate her as well.

“And what’s more,” the Prime Minister went on, mopping sweat from his brow with a handkerchief, “if we were to search magically on too large a scale, there’s always the chance that people might notice.”

Granted differences in size and scope, people of the Holy Eldant Empire were generally acquainted with magic. There weren’t a lot of what you would call wizards, but magical items or tools were a fairly common sight around town. The rings we used to translate each other’s languages were an example.

Maybe he meant that a large-scale magical search would have an effect on magical items in the vicinity. Did magic work like electromagnetism? Could magical items interfere with each other like electronic ones sometimes did?

“We don’t want this to get out of hand,” Zahar said. “If it became generally known that the empress was missing—well, I hardly want to think about the panic that would result.”

That made good sense. He sure wasn’t wrong.

For the average commoner, Her Imperial Majesty was almost a god. News of her disappearance could cause chaos—or inspire opportunists to try to find her before the royal knights did.

That was why Prime Minister Zahar felt he had to exhaust every other possible way of searching the castle. Now that I looked closer, I realized the old man was breathing hard, and there was sweat beading on his face. He had probably been running around, too, before he ran into us.

Come to think of it, hadn’t I heard not long before that he had been in bed with hip pain? Was it okay for him to be dashing around the castle?

“Um—would you like us to help search?” I asked.

Zahar looked at me in surprise. “Hrm? No, that won’t be—”

Almost simultaneously, Minori-san said, “Shinichi-kun?” in an exasperated voice.

“Think about it,” I said. “If I don’t see Petralka, then what was the point of coming here? We’ve still got time before classes start. Every little bit helps, right?”

Truth be told, it just hurt me to see this old man rushing around, wearing himself out. I was basically trying to say, “I’ll search instead, so you go and get some rest.”

“And what if Petralka is hiding somewhere?” The sweet face of Her Majesty passed through my mind. “I just thought... Maybe there’s a chance she’d come out for me.”

I had no proof. But everyone else in this castle was a servant or subject of Petralka’s. I stood outside that system, and sometimes that caused her to be surprisingly open with me. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I thought... she might be desperate to hide from her servants, who were searching for “Her Majesty.” But if it were me, just looking for “Petralka,” maybe she could relax.

“Hmm...” An anxious look passed over Prime Minister Zahar’s face. Finally, though, he said, “Well... If you would be so kind.”

“You bet,” I said, and smiled.

So that was what led to me combing through Eldant Castle on the hunt for Petralka.

I decided to have Myusel and Minori-san go ahead to the school. With them there, at least classes could start if need be. If and when I found Petralka, I would have a winged carriage bring me to school.

“Right, then.” Myusel and Minori-san were on their way, and I had left Prime Minister Zahar. I crossed my arms. “If I were Petralka, where would I go? Where would I hide?”

What would I do if I were in her position?

Or for that matter, if I just wanted to get out of here for a while?

Well, whatever the case, I would probably start by trying to escape the castle. But in order to do that, I would have to pass through several exterior

gates. There was probably no other way to get outside, meaning anyone who just tried to walk away was certain to be spotted by one of knights on guard.

“This is S**ke,” I muttered, in imitation of a certain game which shall remain nameless.

That particular game had a lot to do with sneaking in and out of places, evading enemy security in the process. You had to slip by during the instant their backs were turned, or hide under a cardboard box to move around, or go from shadow to shadow. It was really a lot of fun.

Come to think of it, I was pretty sure Petralka had been playing the cell phone version of that game. And maybe that meant...

“Hmm...”

I gradually worked my way around toward the vicinity of the castle gate. I was especially interested in any shadowed areas that would provide a vantage on the gate.

“Petralkaaa?”

I stepped off the flagstone path that connected the inner and outer gates, following the castle wall. The area was pretty mossy, and there were shrubs here and there. This was just inside the gates, but it was effectively a garden.

“Petralka? It’s me, Shinichi!”

No response. Was I too late? Could she have gone outside already? There was neither circumstantial evidence nor eyewitness testimony to suggest that she had already left the castle when I started searching, but you never knew...

I walked around for a few minutes with those thoughts swirling in my mind.

“Oh.”

Close to the wall, near an especially big bush, I spotted what I was looking for: a large wooden chest. Large enough that a small-ish girl could fit inside.

I meandered up to the box and turned around to look toward the castle gate. Yup. A nice, clear view. Perfect line of sight to the guards at the outer gate.

I was pretty sure I’d nailed it.

“Heh, heh, heh!” I said with a grin, starting to open the wooden chest. I

raised my voice just a little, with a note of triumph, like when you find the ‘it’ in hide and seek. “I found you, Petralka!”

I couldn’t wait to see the shock on Petralka’s face when she realized I’d found her.

But...

“Huh?”

My eyes went wide. Petralka was there, no question. But the lovely young empress just stared at the ground, not so much as glancing in my direction. In fact, she was hugging her knees, curled up into a little ball. She didn’t move a muscle.

“Petralka...-san?” I hadn’t really meant to add the honorific, but I couldn’t help myself. I crouched down and looked at her profile.

My sweet little empress... was asleep.

She wasn’t wearing her usual flashy imperial garb, but a simple one-piece dress (a negligée?) that looked like it was probably for sleeping. Her head was resting on her knees, and she was breathing softly and evenly.

Jeez, now *that’s* moe.

Finding her curled up asleep like some adorable little animal—it grabbed my heartstrings and wouldn’t let go.

For a moment I could have reflexively carted the wooden chest home, empress and all, but I resisted the urge. You know—Yes! Lolita! No! Touch! Wait... Maybe that wasn’t quite the same thing. When faced with cuteness like this, maybe it didn’t matter.

“Hey... Petralka?”

Okay, so it did matter.

“Hey, what are you doing sleeping out here? Dressed like that? You’ll catch a cold.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the raging storm of moe within me, then gently laid a hand on Petralka’s shoulder.

*Wow... She’s so small...*

It took me a moment to work up the courage to touch her, but when I did, it was clear even through her nightshirt how delicate her body was. This wasn’t the first time we had ever touched, but usually it was because she was squeezing onto my knees or delivering a right hook to my face. This was the first time *I* had been the one to touch *her*. So even though I’d known she was small, this was the first time it really sunk in for me how

physically slight she was.

And Petralka, the owner of this fragile body, was the empress on whose shoulders rested this entire nation.

As ruler, she had official duties to deal with every day. Of course, she had a whole list of advisors supporting her, starting with Prime Minister Zahar. But unlike Zahar and all the others, the empress was the one person who couldn't be replaced. How could anyone not in her position understand the pressure she was under?

"I can see why you might want to run away," I whispered. I spoke quietly so as not to wake her.

"...er..."

Suddenly, however, Petralka murmured something herself.

"'Er'?"

It was quiet. I looked again at Petralka, sleeping there with her face buried in her knees. Only now I saw the tears squeezing out of her eyes and rolling down her cheeks.

"...Father... Mother..."

I was frozen in place. All I could do was stare at Petralka as she crouched there, crying in her sleep. I was totally incapable of anything else.

Was she dreaming of her dead father and mother? How could I possibly interrupt that?

"Shinichi."

Someone behind me said my name as I crouched there deep in thought.

The voice belonged to a young man. I looked back reflexively and saw a knight standing there. He had the same silver hair as Petralka, falling down to his waist. He was actually quite pretty. He was the noble, Garius en Cordobal.

He was a relative of Petralka's, as well as the minister of military and diplomatic affairs. On top of that, as a knight of the realm, he was also the captain of the First Knights. He wore a lot of hats, you might say. Hats that collectively made him very important.

"Minister Cordobal... What are you doing here?"

"I saw you going this way," Garius answered quietly, crouching down next to me. He set a white-gloved hand on Petralka's shoulder and shook her gently.

"Majesty?"

“Mn...?” Petralka still sounded half-asleep. But Garius continued to shake her and called her again, more firmly this time.

“Majesty.”

At this, Petralka’s eyes fluttered open. She sleepily took in the two of us. “Garius...? Shinichi?”

However, she was quick to grasp the situation. Her expression slowly changed from one of sleepiness to some kind of emotion, but I couldn’t quite tell what emotion it was. She looked to me like she was angry, smiling, and crying all at once. Maybe she was.

“Let us go back,” Garius urged gently. Petralka didn’t say anything. She seemed to be just looking at the ground, but I could see that she was biting her lip.

“Petral—” I started, but before I could get any further the empress thrust herself to her feet and said, “Let’s go.” Her face as she gazed forward was clear and sure, with no hint of the vulnerability I had seen just a moment before. Only a few tears left in the corners of her eyes remained as evidence that what I had seen was anything more than a dream or illusion.

Then she wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, and even those vanished.

Petralka glanced at me and nodded, then positioned herself between me and Garius and started taking great strides forward.

“Uh—”

I was going to call out to her, but there was something in her posture that wouldn’t permit it. There was no question that I wasn’t dealing with the girl Petralka anymore, but with Her Majesty the Empress. This was not someone I could speak to heedlessly.

“Shinichi,” Garius said as I dumbly watched the Eldant empress leave. “I thank you for finding Her Majesty.”

“Oh,” I answered, speaking almost without thinking about it. “Nothing to it... I did... promise I’d look for her...” I stood up, but then I looked at Garius.

“Um. Minister Cordobal?”

“What is it?”

“I don’t suppose Her Majesty could... take a vacation? Even just for a day?”

Garius didn’t say anything, but the moment I spoke, his eyebrows

furrowed just slightly.

*Uh-oh. Wrong thing to ask?*

I started trying to make excuses, a little panicked. “Uh, I just mean—Petralka looks a little tired... I thought maybe she could, you know, use a break from... empress-ing...”

“As I suspect you realize, that would be impossible,” Garius said, letting out a small sigh. “There is never any end of duties to which only the empress can attend.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Sure.”

This wasn’t like just taking a day off of school. If the absolute ruler were to be absent for a day, it would affect the national government at every level. Possibly, it could even mean life or death for the inhabitants of that nation—and not just a few of them. Maybe everyone.

And to be perfectly honest, I was one of the factors that bore responsibility for putting Petralka in this position. She was so taken with otaku culture that she went out of her way to find excuses to meet with me, and made time to read manga or watch anime despite her relentless public obligations. Those things seemed to help her feel better about life, but at the same time, any time she spent doing those things was time she didn’t spend on her real job.

“I’ll have a winged carriage prepared immediately,” Garius said, then set off after Petralka.

The message was clear: *You’d better leave*.

Well, even if I had that audience with Petralka, I wouldn’t know quite how to act toward her right now. After a moment’s pause, I let out a sigh and followed after them.

Class had already started when I arrived at the school. Standing at the lectern in front of the room was... Myusel.

I spent a few minutes quietly observing her teaching style from out in the hall, and I was surprised to discover how well-developed it was. Things seemed to be going smoothly.

“Ahem,” she was saying, “in other words...”

Incidentally, at my insistence, Myusel was teaching not in her usual maid uniform, but in a blazer and pencil skirt. She seemed a little self-conscious, maybe because of the unfamiliar outfit, and the clothes seemed to dominate her a little more than usual—but that wasn't a bad thing. If, one day, she put on a pair of glasses, she would be the archetypal young female teacher fresh out of college, who still has so much to learn; or one of those sweet female assistant teachers that the students all refer to with *-chan*. If she said something like, "Ai yi yi, Shinichi-kun, you mustn't do *that*," I'm confident I would die of moe right on the spot.

But never mind that.

"So in Jappaneez," she was saying, "the word *moe*, you see, has two distinct meanings."

She stuttered every once in a while, but basically her delivery was logical and clean. I knew she was a smart one. In order to explain something to someone else, you can't just memorize it; it has to make sense to you.

It really did seem to be going exceptionally well...

"Both basically mean 'very good,' but, ahem, one is a word used primarily with regard to women and romantic relationships, while the other has to do with admiration, the welling up of emotion, and, er, agitation. They sound the same, making them easy to confuse, so please be careful. If you really need to distinguish them, the former is called, uh, 'the *kusakanmuri* one,' and the latter is known as 'the *hihen* one.'"

This... This constituted going well, didn't it? Trying to explain the exact difference between *moe* as in □□ and *moe* as in □□ wasn't easy, as it was a pretty subjective matter, but I thought Myusel had really grasped the idea and was doing a good job communicating it to the students. One could argue that there was a pile of other things the students might have been better off learning first, but whatever.

This was an otaku classroom, after all.

Myusel had been reluctant at first to consider teaching other people, but the fact was that she was the first local Japanese speaker in the Holy Eldant Empire, and there really wasn't anyone else qualified to stand up there and teach... except maybe Petralka herself, who was in sort of a Japanese language learning contest with Myusel.

The students were actually picking up the language really quickly, such

that some of them were already reading light novels in the original.

Maybe it would have been tougher if they were just trying to learn the language of some random country. But when you bring entertainment into the mix, everyone picks things up quicker. I'm picturing, you know, a series of *Learn Whatever Through the Power of Moe* books. *English the Moe Way*, that sort of thing. Books like that aren't so uncommon, and the fact that people are buying them is basically an admission of how effective they are.

"Oh," Myusel said as the bell rang. "That's all for today, then."

My timing was perfect. I opened the door and came in.

"Oh, Master," Myusel said.

"Shinichi-sensei!" the kids all said, responding to me immediately. They used to just call me "Sensei," but now they were calling me "Shinichi-sensei." Properly speaking, they should have called me "Kanou-sensei," but Minori-san's habit of calling me "Shinichi-kun" seemed to have had a bad influence on them. Not that I really minded either way.

"Shinichi-sensei! Look!" Two elf boys, a dwarf boy, and a dwarf girl came over to me, looking excited about something.

"What's up?" I said.

"Try reading this, Sensei!"

They thrust a sheaf of copier paper at me.

Paper, by the way, was expensive around here, but it was easy enough to import large volumes of it from Japan, so it could be used pretty freely at the school. There are a lot of subjects where writing aids memorization. And lambskin paper isn't really suited to just making notes.

"What's this?" I said, taking the bundle of paper and paging through it. It was packed with Eldant script.

"It's *Order of the Dark Knights: Zero's Revenge*!" the dwarf girl said happily, to my mystification.

I recognized the title, of course. It was an anime that had ended last year. The main character is granted a mysterious power by a girl who appears out of nowhere; he puts on a mask and takes the name Zero, then attempts to take over the world. He's an antihero who engages with the world as a terrorist, but the series is also full of love and friendship, and it was popular with both guys and girls. I was pretty sure we had the DVD box set in the library; most of the students had probably seen it. I was also fairly confident that it had spawned a light novel adaptation, which was also on the shelves.

And I knew at least one student was borderline obsessed with light novel translation...

"Hm?"

Myusel had been giving me lessons as well, so I could understand a little bit of the Eldant language, but still, looking at this gave me a strange feeling.

*What was this?*

I recognized the title on the cover, but it felt just a little... off. Like it started too suddenly, right in the middle of things.

"What's this?" I asked. "This isn't a translation of the novel, is it?"

"That's right!" the elf boy said, clenching his fist as if in victory. "After we finished the anime, we really, really wanted to know what happened next. And so Eduardo wrote it down for us!"

Talk about weird. They were already coming up with derivative works.

Eduardo was the obsessed translator I mentioned. I had seen him in the library, so bent on translating novels that he wouldn't even sleep. I had been worried about him going completely off the deep end, so I told him to limit himself to three hours of translation per day, and that seemed to take the edge off things. Had he decided that non-translation writing was fair game and started doing fanfic?!

I looked around the classroom and spotted Eduardo in one corner, his pen working busily.

"Aw, come on..."

I mean, my dad is a light novel author, so it's not like I don't understand. Although translating and creating original stories are both writing, they use different parts of the brain. There's a lot of overlap, of course, but the necessary talent is fundamentally different. It's not a matter of one being better than the other; they're just different things.

That's why a translator can't necessarily decide to just start writing a story and succeed at it.

"I always knew he was a serious otaku," I muttered.

"It isn't actually done yet, so we asked Eduardo to keep writing!" the other elf boy—Loek—said, sounding excited.

Beside him, the dwarf girl Romilda blushed. "Shinichi-sensei, who do you think will end up with Zero?"

"In the anime he didn't wind up with anyone at all—that's what bothers

me most!”

“I’d ship him with Cool C!”

“No, Kanon is best for Zero!”

“I’m all for Seiryuu, obviously!”

“Seiryuu’s a *guy*!”

The four of them launched into an animated argument.

Er...

*Loek... Romilda... I thought you guys couldn’t stand each other?*

Then again, it would be a real mess if I were to remind them of that and they were to be like, “Oh yeah!” and start flinging magic spells around the classroom again, so I kept the thought to myself.

*But this is a perfect example of how...*

Yes! Of how anime and manga and games and light novels could bring former enemies together as friends!

That made me personally happy, and as a Japanese otaku, it made me proud, too. Although I guess in Loek and Romilda’s case, the anime appeared to be coming between them, but you know. Even so...

I gazed down at the bundle of paper in my hand. Setting aside specific quality concerns, it hadn’t even been a year since we had first introduced otaku culture to this world, and there were already people writing fan fiction...

*Maybe*, I thought, *the day when we see a* doujinshi *convention here in the Eldant Empire isn’t so far off after all.*

Class ended safely, and the three of us headed home together.

“There were no big fights today, huh?” Minori-san said.

Now that I thought about it, she was right; I hadn’t noticed any arguing. Maybe it was going on where I couldn’t see it, but compared to before, when students had been straight-up using magic on each other right in front of the teacher, the effort to hide any disputes could be considered progress. Even if I did realize that it wasn’t exactly a good thing.

“I could be happy if every day went like this,” I said with a half-smile.

“Oh yeah, Myusel, your lesson was great, too,” I added, turning to

Myusel as we came inside.

"Oh, I would hardly say—"

"It sounded really easy to understand."

"Well, thank you very much..." Myusel looked down shyly. The pointy ears that poked out from beneath her hair were beet red.

*Gah! She is one cute maid-san!*

I had been worried that the students might give her grief on account of her being a half-elf, but apparently there hadn't been any trouble. I guess between my earlier injunctions and the fact that Myusel had saved Petralka's life, word had spread among the students and their friends that Myusel Fourant was particularly close to the empress. In other words, this wasn't a sign that discrimination toward half-elves was on the way out, but it was enough for now. We had to start by shrinking the gap.

"A-Ahem, well then, I'll go get dinner ready." Myusel bowed and pattered off quickly down the hallway. I let out an admiring breath as I watched her go.

Recently, my work had been going... really well, actually.

Obviously, there were the occasional hijinx, like this morning, but for the most part everything had been peaceful, without any serious problems. I would be happy to think my efforts had helped produce that result.

As I stood there, indulging myself in surprisingly middle-aged-guy-ish thoughts—

"Shinichi-kun!"

I heard someone call my name, a note of panic in their voice. When I turned around, there was Minori-san. A middle-aged man (an actual one) was bursting through the front door the rest of us had so recently walked through.

"This is bad!"

He was wearing an uninspiring suit that looked altogether out of place in a Middle Ages-European fantasy world, his hair parted neatly down the middle—a classic midlife salaryman. I didn't know whether the effect was intentional or not, but he always looked that way, so anywhere he went, a vague sense that something didn't look quite right followed.

His name was Matoba Jinzaburou. He was the chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, the man on the ground when it came to exchange with this alternate world. Basically, he was my direct superior.

He took care of a lot of the details for Amutech, like reporting back to the Japanese government, requisitioning whatever we needed, and various and sundry other stuff.

.....Okay, so putting it like that makes it sound like we were pretty much buddy-buddy. But it was, as they say, complicated. He wasn't my enemy, but neither was I really sure I could trust him as a friend.

The Japanese government had intended to use otaku culture as a weapon of invasion against this world, under the guise of "cultural exchange." When I rebelled against that plan, they had sent a special JSDF strike team to take me out.

And Matoba-san was definitely more on their side than mine. Granted, he hadn't really been directly involved in the attempt on my life, and he had even spoken and acted on my behalf, but my suspicion of him just never quite went away. He was a real plotter, Matoba-san was, and if the situation called for it, he would happily give you a friendly smile while lying through his teeth.

Starting to get the picture?

So it was more than a little surprising to see the normally unflappable bureaucrat looking so out of sorts. I had known him to leave other people lost for words at times, but I can't say I had ever imagined him being the victim of the same.

This suggested something very un-fun had happened.

Minori-san must have had the same thought, because she gestured down the hall and said, "Let's not have this conversation here. Come to the living room."

"Right... Right." Matoba-san nodded and followed us to the next room.

Is this what I got for thinking things were peaceful? I didn't know yet what the big deal was, but if it had Matoba-san this upset, it was likely to mean a lot of trouble. I mean, he hadn't even been this bothered when I had gone rogue on the Japanese government.

We came into the living room, and I sat down on the sofa. Minori-san and I sat next to each other, and Matoba-san sat across from us.

"You recall the recent soccer tournament, don't you?" Matoba-san said.

"Sure." I nodded. "How could I forget?"

The tournament he was referring to was the very first official soccer exhibition in the Holy Eldant Empire, presented in front of the empress

herself. We had borrowed some land from the empire, had a soccer stadium constructed, and then had teams representing each race go up against each other.

Thanks to my failure to explain the rules, and the fact that the players therefore got most of their knowledge of soccer from manga and anime, we ended up with a ridiculous *Shao**** *Soccer*-style dustup with magic and crazy super-moves and everything. The players and spectators all got a big kick out of it, and the tournament ended up a huge success.

"Were you aware that that tournament was being recorded?"

"Er—Was it?"

It was the first I'd heard of it. Then again, the JSDF had dragged an awful lot of equipment into that stadium. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn there had been some cameras in there.

"We have an obligation to show that not just the military, but our public institutions, are being run prudently—and that means an obligation to submit recordings of our activities," Minori-san informed me. "Especially in a situation like this, where there are so many firsts. We were told to keep records that are as detailed as possible. We take lots of videos. Especially with CCD cameras getting so small these days."

She pulled what appeared to be a fountain pen out of her pocket. When I looked closely, I could see a little hole at one end—there was a lens tucked in there.

"We recorded that soccer game with some pretty hi-def equipment," she said.

"I had no idea," I said.

I supposed video would help prevent any strange misunderstandings, and anyway, how many pages would you fill even trying to describe a fantasy world like this one?

But at the same time, what must the government suits have thought to suddenly find themselves watching something like that?

"But what does that have to do with..."

I cocked my head. Matoba-san let out a deep sigh.

"The video was—ahem—leaked."

".....What?"

For a second, I wasn't sure what he meant. The idea was so shocking that my brain couldn't process it. Minori-san and I simply stared at him.

Matoba-san stared back, then added, “On YouTube, you see. It’s been viewed all over the world.”

# Chapter Two: Magical Girl

I was running. Running as fast as I could.

I had to get away. I poured every ounce of my strength into fleeing.

That was all I could think about as my feet pounded the earth. Several times, I nearly fell, flailing my arms pathetically to steady myself and groaning.

Soon, though, my flight was arrested.

I let out a gasp: a dead end.

Several meters ahead of me was a sheer cliff. There was no more ground for my feet to pound. Everything around me was full of rich greenery; you could almost call it idyllic—but under the leaden clouds that now hovered above me, that pastoral beauty seemed like just a ploy to emphasize how hopeless my situation was.

"Now I've got you... *tee hee*!"

The words came from behind me, with the force of a death sentence. I spun around—and there stood a girl with emerald eyes, staring at me.

The wind caressing the grass of the field caught her silver hair and caused it to dance. Unusually, though, that hair was tied to either side of her head—twintails. They made her look like a different person.

But it was Petralka.

Her outfit, too, was different from usual. She was wearing a white shirt, the neckline of which had unique reverse triangle shapes. It was paired with white socks and a pleated skirt in dark plaid. It seemed pure and simple at first glance, yet her midriff, which was suddenly visible when she arched her back, gave off an inescapable eroticism.

*Oh! Be still my heart!* I could never confuse that outfit for anything else! It was the one, the only—

*Seeraa-fuku!* Sailor uniform!

The outfit Petralka was wearing was the quintessential Japanese uniform, worn by female students across the nation.

Then, she slid her right hand into her pocket and pulled something out. It

was a little bit bigger than the palm of her hand—a makeup mirror set with an elaborate pattern of gems. She raised the compact high and shouted, "*Magical... CHARGE!!*"

That very instant, a windstorm sprang up from who knew where and Petralka's body was wreathed in light. Her school uniform began to disappear piece by piece, and although the backlighting ensured it wasn't possible to see anything really titillating, it was obvious enough that she wasn't wearing a thread, the outline of her body clearly visible. Then that mysterious breeze blew in a new set of clothes for her.

The transformation was the work of a moment. I blinked, and Petralka was dressed in something completely different. She was wearing a leotard like a ballerina's, which followed the lines of her body closely. Along with that was a skirt that stopped just above her thighs. The whole outfit was riddled with decorations, and it didn't spare the skin at her shoulders and legs, which was almost pearlescent. The compact was now hanging at her neckline, as if to underline its role as the catalyst.

"Say—your—prayers!" Petralka said, pointing at me with a motion so crisp I felt like it should have come with a sound effect.

And then...

“Great! Cut!”

Minori-san’s voice suddenly interrupted us.

The tension that had hung in the air instantly vanished.

“All right, everyone, time for a break! We’ll do the next scene in thirty minutes!”

“Yes, ma’am!” came a chorus of student voices.

The kids were dressed about like usual, but today they weren’t holding notebooks or pens. Instead they carried basic cameras, lighting equipment, and shotgun microphones. Everything necessary to do some filming.

“Nice work, Master,” Myusel said, coming up to me at a gentle jog. She seemed to have judged now to be the perfect moment for a word.

Incidentally, Myusel wasn’t dressed in her usual outfit—either her maid uniform or her going-out dress—either. She wore a sailor uniform just like Petralka’s.

As good as her maid outfit and the suit she wore to school both looked, there was an innocent freshness about a student uniform that I deeply appreciated. The blazer gave her the look of—how do I put this?—a refined adult, and that was nice, but I have to say, it’s hard to let go of the sailor uniform—the style of styles, the classic of classics.

“Shinichi-sama, those clothes... They look wonderful on you.”

“Well, uh... I mean, I’m pretty used to them...” I smiled just a bit awkwardly.

I was wearing plaid pants and a blazer, looking like a student myself. Basically, the guy’s version of the sailor uniform that Petralka and Myusel were wearing. A perfectly normal, unremarkable bit of clothing—at least if you came from Earth. To Myusel, it must have had the savor of something otherworldly.

Um... also, I know it’s kind of ironic for me to be saying I was “used to wearing” a uniform after I had refused to go to school for so long.

“R-Really though, Myusel, the uniform looks great on you, too.”

“You mean it?” Myusel asked, her pale cheeks tinting rose.

“Sure I do. You look adorable. I’m almost head over heels already.”

Myusel was pretty darn cute to start with, the perfect model for a school uniform.

“’Course, I think you look good no matter what you’re wearing,” I said.

“Oh! Th..... Thank you very much!” The red color spread right up to the tips of her ears. “That makes me v... very happy!”

She clasped both her hands to her chest as if giving her outfit a hug. It was an invigorating motion, causing me to go all moe right then and there.

“I didn’t know what I’d do if... If I looked weird in this...”

“Oh, you like the outfit that much?”

“Yes. Or rather...” Her voice dropped almost to a whisper, and she said somewhat hesitantly, “This outfit... it makes a pair with yours, doesn’t it?”

“I guess you could say that. They come from the same school.” I smiled.

The boys’ and girls’ uniforms had their differences, but the basic plaid pattern was the same, and the colors complemented each other. I guess I had just figured that was how uniforms were; I hadn’t really thought of them as a “pair.”

“I guess you could use that word if you wanted.”

“I’m very happy,” Myusel repeated, smiling shyly.

*Yaaargh! This girl is sooo cute!*

“If I went to your country wearing this, do you think I would fit in?”

“Er... yeah, I think you’d be all right,” I said.

We might have to do something about those pointy half-elf ears, but then we wouldn’t be talking about the outfit anymore.

“That’s wonderful!” Myusel whispered, looking at the ground to hide her blush.

On that note, I hadn’t been back to Japan since I arrived in this world, and maybe it was about time I went back for a while, just to see for myself what the new trends were. Maybe Myusel would like it if I could bring her with me when I went.

One thing that worried me, though, was that if I wasn’t careful about going back, I could find myself in all kinds of trouble with the elements of the Japanese government that didn’t appreciate me taking matters into my own hands.

As I was thinking about all this...

“Shinichi!” Petralka called, coming over to me. “What do you think? Does this suit us?”

All the high drama of earlier was gone from her face—instead she looked practically giddy, spinning to show off the thoroughly decorated

outfit.

*Ooh!*

Her skirt billowed, revealing her bare thighs...

“Well, does it look good?”

“Y... Yeah, it does.”

*Maybe a little* too *good.*

My gaze was especially captured by the whiteness of her absolute territory. In the transformation scene earlier, just based on the outline of her body, you would assume she was naked, but of course she was wearing a leotard. And frankly, to a guy, that was a lot more arousing than just straight nudity.

Er... But forget about all that.

“Why did you pause just now?” Petralka asked, puffing out her cheeks.

*Y-Your thighs, Your Majesty. Your absolute territory...*

Not, of course, answers I could actually give.

“Oh, I just, you know. I was a little surprised. That outfit really does look good on you.”

That was the best I could do for now. And it wasn’t untrue.

“Is that so? Very good, then! Mm!”

Petralka nodded in satisfaction. Myusel smiled shyly.

I looked at the two girls and thought back on the several tumultuous days we had just endured.

YouTube.

The Japanese have a habit of mispronouncing it as *Yoh-Tsubé*, but regardless, I hardly need to introduce the world-famous video sharing website. (Incidentally, I’ve heard that the *Tube* part is a reference to television.)

Anyway, the site is a really simple way to upload video files to the internet and share your clips with users around the world. People all over the globe are making videos pretty much 24/7 and sharing them on the web. You can find anything from an anime theme song you vaguely remember to battlefield footage of exploding bombs.

Nothing could be simpler. Nothing at all.

And that's why, consciously or not, mistakes happen.

The day Matoba-san had burst in saying there was trouble, we used the mansion's computer to watch the video file he had brought.

It showed a soccer match, of a kind I had figured would give any actual soccer players a heart attack. It was absurd: yes, they were on a soccer field kicking a soccer ball, but the similarities pretty much ended there. Giants were appearing out of the ground, the ball was bursting into flame because of the incredible air resistance, and when someone scored a goal the shockwave rippled through the stadium. And then there were the peed-off JSDF soldiers (okay, mostly Minori-san) firing guns at the ball.

I had *been* there, and yet watching it like this, I couldn't help wondering who had done the special effects. It didn't seem real.

"But who would have...?" I asked, turning my gaze to one corner of the video. There, you could see numbers that changed every one-hundredth of a second. A timecode. Common enough on recorded videos.

"We don't know who the culprit is yet," Matoba-san said, "but we suspect they used file-sharing software."

"Oh, you mean—"

Like Win** or Sha**. Programs developed with the goal of allowing people to share computer files with every stranger on the internet. Apparently these things started as simple research projects, but then some bad eggs started using them to distribute copies of copyrighted works. Okay—lots and lots of bad eggs. Worse, some people even developed viruses that could search your computer files at will and use file-sharing software to propagate them around the internet. Talk about trouble.

The point is, important confidential information could be taken from someone's computer even if they didn't want it to be.

Obviously, government offices had pretty stiff restrictions on the use of software like that, but they couldn't control what employees did with their own computers. So some public servant goes home with secret work-related stuff, fires up his PC, and suddenly the information is leaked.

It was a common problem, and it looked like it had happened again.

"In any event, the web is in an uproar about this."

"It broke the internet, huh?"

"Ah, yes, that is what you say these days when everyone seems focused

on one specific thing, isn't it? Yes. The internet is broken. As you can see, the video features both a timecode and the JSDF..."

"So people are claiming that proves that it's real film taken by the military?"

"Indeed." Matoba-san nodded, looking absolutely exhausted. "The prime minister and many other officials seem less interested in the leak than in finding whoever caused it."

"Eager for a scapegoat, huh?" I smirked.

Something big happens, and the first impulse isn't to clean up the mess, but to find someone to blame. Well, I guess it's not just politicians and bureaucrats who do that.

"Answering the public reaction to the video has gone on the back burner. Anyway, there would be no way they could stop the spread of the video at this point even if they wanted to. I agree that determining the cause of the leak is important, but if we let this go on, we won't be able to keep people fooled much longer."

Like words once they left your mouth, you couldn't take back information that had gone up on the internet. If somebody saved a copy somewhere, then no matter how carefully you got rid of every instance you could find, that saved file could be used to start the whole thing up again.

"Already, certain military devotees have analyzed the images and declared that they show the real JSDF. Based on the equipment and unit insignia, they've already begun to identify the exact unit involved, as well."

"Shoot... They're no slouches, are they?"

On the internet, people with particular obsessions worked so quickly and persistently that you wondered where they were hiding the rest of the time. I suspected they really could identify the particular unit, based on minor details that would completely elude the average layperson.

After that, one thing would lead to another.

"So," I said, looking at Matoba-san again, "you've come to find out if there's something I can do."

"Exactly. Otherwise we're in a bit of a deadlock," Matoba-san said. "I'm glad you're so quick to understand. It's hard to believe you're a former home security guard."

"...Are you mocking me?"

"Just speaking my mind." Matoba-san's already narrow eyes squinted

even narrower, a dry smile crossing his face.

It would have been simple enough to point out that this wasn't our responsibility—and frankly, it wasn't our problem.

But then again, we had no way of knowing what would happen to Amutech if the Japanese government found itself unable to keep this other world a secret. In the worst-case scenario, I might be forcibly sent back to Japan and the JSDF might be evacuated, after which America or China, say, might try to assert a claim on the Eldant Empire. It seemed likely that all of that would mean the dismantling of Japan's speartip organization, Amutech.

And *that* meant I might never see Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Brooke, or Cerise again. I might lose everyone I had come to care about in this world.

That was one thing I was desperate to avoid.

"But can't you just say that the video is a fake? Made up?"

But then, a bumbled cover-up could be worse than nothing at all. Right now, people still didn't know where exactly the video had come from, so if the government were to suddenly blurt out "That video isn't real!", it would be as good as authenticating it. Like a date and signature.

Government: "Th-That thing isn't real! It's fake! C-Completely and totally fabricated!"

Random Citizen: "Oh. So it was a hoax all along. Okay, then."

Said nobody ever.

On the other hand, if the government were to just stand back and watch, the rumor might take on a life of its own. People would keep adding to the story, and somewhere in all the fantasy, the truth might just get mixed in, too.

"How long has it been since the leak was confirmed?" Minori-san asked.

"About five days. It exploded on Twitter around the third day."

"Ah..."

And there it was. Twitter, once again at the center of the storm. Some people referred to the site as an "idiot detector" due to its tendency to burst into flame anytime someone said something stupid or bragged about doing something wrong. First file-sharing software, and now Twitter? Weren't these bureaucrats ready for *anything* in the digital age?

I guess the Salt and Pepper Brigade never fully grasped either what made the net so useful—or so dangerous. That was why no matter what happened, they always found themselves on the back foot.

But whatever the case...

"If we don't do something, this is going to get out of hand," I said.

We didn't just have to do something—we had to do it quickly. People couldn't be allowed to know that this world really existed.....

Really existed?

"Fiction and nonfiction," I muttered. Then I said, "Matoba-san."

"Yes? Have you thought of a plan?" He looked at me, but his face said he wasn't expecting much.

I adopted a thoughtful look and (although I didn't have much confidence myself) said, "Maybe we could turn this world into... fiction."

"Huh?" Minori-san's eyes went wide.

"What do you mean by that?" Matoba-san asked, leaning forward slightly.

"The video everyone's watching is real, obviously," I said, trying to get my thoughts together even as I spoke. My light-novel-author dad always said that the best way to turn a half-formed idea into reality was to try to explain it to someone else. "But what if it were a *real* part of a *fake* video?"

Minori-san and Matoba-san both looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"In other words, tell people that what got leaked is part of a movie. The timecode, the presence of the JSDF—you can explain it all by pretending they're just characters in a new film."

Matoba-san still didn't look quite sure, but Minori-san grasped what I was getting at.

"I see!" she said. (Well, she was an otaku at heart.)

"You remember that movie *Clo***field*?" I said. "It was a pseudo-documentary—a movie done in a documentary style."

This meant presenting the movie as though it had been taken with a recording device, in order to give it a heightened sense of realism. (Sometimes this was called a "found-footage-style film.")

My idea involved reversing the formula: the extremely convincing quality of the video would make it that much more plausible that it was actually a pseudo-documentary.

"But what about the magic?" Minori-san asked.

"CG effects for our movie, of course. If we make sure the fake footage contains obviously CG stuff, people will think it was all just special

effects.”

It was hard to make fake things look real, but it was easy to make real things look fake.

“Say, Matoba-san, what about the voices in the video?”

“As you can see. The magic rings don’t work via machines, so the dialogue is all in the Eldant language. Something else the internet is more than a little excited about...”

“Make that part of the production, too, then.”

Nowadays, every time some aliens or alternate-dimensional humans show up in a movie, someone makes up a language for them that the actors have to speak. Especially in pseudo-documentaries.

“But does this suggest that you intend to create... a theatrical feature?” Matoba-san asked doubtfully. “Isn’t there some concern about maintaining consistency?”

“Sure. But listen,” Minori-san said, “we don’t make a full movie, just a making-of thing. ‘*Peek behind the scenes!*’ That’ll convince people, and it will be a lot cheaper and less time-consuming than screwing around making an actual movie.”

“Then later we say that budget or rights or whatever killed the thing.” I grinned.

I’d heard (again from my light-novel-author dad) that that sort of thing was common enough. How many times have we seen people get excited because Hollywood said they were going to turn some anime or manga into a movie, only for the project to languish in production hell for years and years? If it happened one more time here, no one would be surprised.

“Matoba-san. Could you get us some film gear?”

“Hmm...” Matoba-san crossed his arms and made a thoughtful noise. “I’ll manage it somehow. If all we need is a little equipment, things should stay fairly cheap. If I tell the higher-ups that we’ll take care of the video problem, I don’t think they’ll raise a fuss.”

“Oh, and I need some voice actors, if you can wrangle them.”

“Voice actors?”

“You might have to pretend you need them to collaborate with the JSDF on something. That means maybe you’ll have to tell them that the production has the blessing of the Japanese government. And a government production might not get away with just subtitling the Eldant stuff. You

wouldn't have to bring the VAs over here or anything."

I imagined Myusel or Petralka or Elvia being dubbed by this or that popular actress. Ahhh! It was enough to make me giddy!

Er... This definitely didn't have anything to do with guilt. I was just really dedicated to finding the most effective way to make our video believable. I was definitely not taking this as an opportunity to shake hands with my favorite VAs, get their autographs, or whatever. Not thinking about that for a second!

...Okay, I know I sound kind of unconvincing at this point.

"Fine," Matoba-san said. "I'll work it out with my superiors."

"Yes, please," I said.

*Yesss! At least we would have a way to film.*

"But Shinichi-kun, what about a script?"

"That's a very good question..."

Yes, it was just a making-of thing, but without a story, no one would know what to say. Try to improvise, and things always break down.

Still, that meant we basically had a week or so to go from story concept to finished script...

"Maybe you could write it, Shinichi-kun?"

"Uh, maybe not..."

I mean, yes, my dad was a light novelist. But I had never written a script or a book. I was a 100% consumer-side otaku.

I had seen my dad doing serious battle with deadlines more than once, and I had an idea that it wasn't a lot of fun. That left me not very eager to try it myself.

Besides, writing a completely original story and writing something that cohered with an already existing video demanded different skills. (Something else my dad said.)

I mean, it was practically a derivative work, and—

"Hey..."

*That's right.*

I knew the perfect person. Someone very close to me.

"It's going to be all right, Minori-san."

"Huh?"

"I have an ace up my sleeve."

Then I gave her an exuberant thumbs-up.

It was the day after I had spoken to Minori-san and Matoba-san about the video problem.

Classes were over, and I was in the school library talking to my "ace."

"Eduardo, have you ever felt like you've got a story inside you that you would love to write?"

"That's a good question..."

Eduardo was sitting across from me. This is the guy I mentioned: the one who was totally obsessed with translating, to the point that he actually made the jump into fan fiction.

I had since realized that it had been less than a month since we had imported the anime and light novel versions of *Order of the Dark Knights*, which meant Eduardo had binge-watched the anime, read through the entire novel, *and* produced his sequel all within that time span.

That meant he had to be a pretty quick writer, right? That was what gave me the idea to let him handle the script for our "movie."

Granted, no one person is good at everything, so there were no promises that he would be able to manage it.

"You know... I'd like to do something with magical girls."

"A magical girl piece, huh?"

He was in deep.

"Like *Rental☆Madoka* or *Prepure*."

"Ooh! *Rental☆Madoka*! Now that's a great series!"

"Isn't it? Madoka is such a go-getter!"

"Mikan's adorable, too!"

"When Minami-san got her head cut off, I had no idea what was going to happen, but—"

"But bringing her back as an employee at the ghost company? What a twist!"

All of a sudden, we were just two excited otaku.

Wait. This wasn't the time to be getting all moe about *Rental☆Madoka*!

"Uh, anyway. Any other ideas you've had?"

"I'd like to do a school series."

Hm. Understandable enough.

“But you would want to set it in this world,” I said, folding my arms in thought. “I mean, there are plenty of school dramas that don’t actually show any school. As long as the main characters are students, I guess... Or would you have it so that there was a normal school over here?” I continued to ruminate. “I guess schools in fantasy settings are common enough these days. Meaning... you have a heroine who passes for a normal student, but in reality she’s a magical girl who fights bad guys.”

“Yeah, I see.”

“But during the fighting, the bad guy lays a trap, and uses this out-of-control magic to open a door to another dimension...”

“Mm-hm, mm-hm.”

“And the boy who appears from it...”

“A boy, got it.” Eduardo was writing down my ramblings as quickly as I could think them up.

“Behind him is an army no one’s ever seen before.”

“An army...”

“The magical girl thinks the army is a bunch of magic-users the bad guy summoned from another world or something, but she’s wrong. It’s actually the JSDF, and they’re not enemies. They just wandered into that dimensional door. They can’t communicate with the magical girl, so there’s a fight... But then the guy who came with them helps explain things and clear up the misunderstanding. Hang on... But then how is the guy communicating with her? Okay. So it’s the reverse. The boy and the magical girl come from the same world, but in the past a similar accident sent him to this *other* world, and now he’s coming home. That’s why he can speak the languages of both worlds. Yeah. That’ll work.”

“That makes sense.”

“The problem is the magical girl... How do you think she became magical?”

“‘Became’ magical? What you mean?”

“I know magic is normal in this world, but if she just uses the same spells everyone else can, then she’s not really *magical* magical, you know?”

“You’re absolutely right!”

“The magic a magical girl uses needs to be... How do I put this? Way, way more powerful and versatile than whatever a normal person can do.”

“That’s a great idea!”

“Oh, just to be sure, but we can have her be one of those magical girls who transforms in order to use magic and fight the enemy, right?”

“We sure can!” Eduardo nodded.

In the grand scheme of magical girl shows, serious, darker battle pieces were relatively new, sort of a branch of the genre. But we wouldn’t worry about that.

“Let’s see... Why is our magical girl special... Hmm...” Eduardo drummed the table with his fingers as he spoke. “I’d like to have her make some kind of contract in order to gain her powers...”

“Yeah, exactly. You’ve got to have a scene where she resolves to fight. We definitely want a contract to mark that out. For sure.”

“I know, right? But who or what does she make the contract with?”

“A contract... Contract... How about some dark corporation?”

“Wouldn’t that be pretty much the exact plot of *Rental ☆Madoka*?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said.

“Hmmm...”

Eduardo and I sat with our arms crossed, staring at the ceiling.

The way we were sitting there muttering was pretty much the image of a manga artist or a novelist with writer’s block, but unfortunately we were just amateurs. We could mutter all we wanted, and it wouldn’t bring us any ideas.

“How about a break?” I suggested at last.

“Yes. I’m just going to go wash my face.” Eduardo nodded, then headed out of the library, looking very tired. Watching him leave, I contemplated how hard it actually was to come up with an original story on the spot.

“Nothing less from you, Shinichi-kun.”

The words came from Minori-san, who was sitting a short distance away and had been keeping an eye on our conversation. She sounded vaguely amused.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked warily.

“Just listen to the talk pour out of you. Come to think of it, your dad is a light novel author, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, *talk*,” I said wryly. “We didn’t actually achieve anything.”

“You think? It sounded to me like you came up with an entire world and a general plot outline.”

“A world? Buh. We came up with some characters. Now we have to try

to shoehorn soccer in there somewhere as a form of ‘diplomacy.’”

What we really needed was a story that could accommodate magic, fantasy, and the JSDF. There were only so many scenarios that could handle all those ingredients. The story that popped into my head was about a Japanese guy who got spirited away to this other world and yadda yadda yadda.

“I did see my dad hashing things out with his editor,” I said. What kind of story and setting did they want? What kind of developments would make it believable? And who would need to show up in it?

According to my dad, there were basically two types of light novel authors. You have the inspired types, who get an idea out of thin air and then hammer out a couple hundred pages, going mostly by feel; and then you have the ones who value skill and experience, building up a world and a story through logic and background.

My dad was definitely the second type.

That meant all my life, I had seen him on long phone calls, fleshing out details with his editor, trying to produce a new story. I admit I was pretty confused the first time I heard him blandly declare, “Okay, considering where we want to go with this, I’ll kill off ten or twelve people. Sound good?”

“I guess on some level, I’m imitating my dad’s working style,” I said. “So maybe it does make a difference that he’s a writer. But seriously, it’s just kind of monkey-see, monkey-do.”

“I only ever read, myself, I don’t write, so I think it’s pretty amazing.”

“Gee... I wonder.”

I’ve got to admit, it felt pretty good to be complimented. Especially by a gorgeous older woman like Minori-san. I felt the edges of my mouth tug into a smile.

“I’m sure if you tried, Minori-san you could—”

“If I were capable of writing word one, believe me, I would have done that story featuring you as a total bottom ages ago.”

*.....Thank you, God, from the bottom of my heart, that Minori-san only ever reads.*

“Oh, hey, on a different subject...” Minori-san leaned forward slightly. “How are you going to handle costumes?”

“Huh? I figured I’d get Matoba-san to find something that looked about

right...”

It was pretty easy these days to go to a store and get cosplay outfits.

“But you’re going to use them in an original production. Isn’t that asking for trouble?”

“Er... I guess you’re right.”

Most of the costumes sold in stores were based on popular anime and manga and games. In other words, if we used them as-is, we would just be ripping somebody off. Of course, it might be possible to do a few simple alterations to make them look new, but... supposing we botched it? The jig would be up then and there, especially in comparison with the convincing (because real) JSDF uniforms and Eldant outfits.

The chances of something going wrong seemed even higher with a magical girl show.

“Say, uh...” Minori-san looked at me beseechingly from behind her glasses. W-Wait a minute... When did she learn to do something so cute?!

As I sat there moe-ing out, Minori-san said, “Maybe I could—I mean, if it’s all right, maybe I could make the costumes.”

“What, you?”

“I don’t think I could handle all of them by myself, but maybe the ones for the main characters. The stuff that’s going to be on-screen a lot. You know how close-fitting the outfits in magical girl shows tend to be. They need to be tailored for the person who’s going to wear them, or they’ll look wrong.”

“Ahh... Yeah, you’re right there.”

“And think of all the problems we might have if we just used pre-made stuff. Girls’ school uniforms or whatever.”

“True enough.”

“Anyway, this is your big chance, right? Aren’t you just dying to dress Myusel in some Gothic Lolita getup, or Elvia in a shrine maiden’s robe?”

I caught my breath.

*Here was a girl who knew what she was talking about.....!*

No, no, no.

But hey... there was an idea here.

I shuddered to realize the unplumbed depths of Minori-san’s otaku-dom. With her around, I (as general manager) could stick to general managing, and not have to get down into the weeds. Right?

But let's put that aside for a second.

"Minori-san, are you..."

"Yes?"

"...a layer?"

"Uh-huh."

She nodded assiduously.

*Layer.* That is to say, a cosplayer.

The term refers to people who like to make and wear clothing that looks like the stuff worn by characters in anime and manga. Now I remembered seeing a blog somewhere on the net that mentioned how some layers like to imagine dressing up other people, or enjoy coordinating outfits that others then wear.

"Shinichi-kun, does this mean you don't do cosplay?"

"I can't say I ever have."

Think about it: What would be the point of a home security guard like me doing cosplay? Whatever else it might be, cosplay normally involves being seen by other people.

"Aw, it's fun," Minori-san said. "You can become someone else."

She did make it sound kind of nice.

"Someone else..." I murmured.

*Someone else. Someone other than who you are now. A temporary escape from reality.*

An image of Petralka flashed through my mind.

"Cosplay is a good way to refresh yourself, too, right?" I asked. "To chase the blues away, you might say."

"Sure," Minori-san said. Then a bit of a pained smile crossed her face. "In fact, that was mostly why I did it."

To become another person... to feel differently.

What if I were to suggest that Petralka try cosplay? It looked like she was having a rough time with the job of being empress, like the position was threatening to overwhelm her. If I could give her an opportunity to forget about her royal duties, even for just a little while, wouldn't that be a good thing? Then again, it might be too much to ask Minori-san to do both the costumes for the movie *and* a cosplay outfit for Petralka.

Wait. So what if Petralka were *in* the—

"That's it!"

“What’s it?”

“Er, nothing,” I said. I hadn’t meant to say anything about it out loud. “Speaking of becoming someone else, Minori-san, what kind of cosplay do you do?”

Her answer surprised me: “I do men and men only.”

*Men only?* Did she mean, like, male characters? With *that* chest?! And *that* face?!

“How could you waste such a golden opportunity?!”

She could’ve at least been a maid. But there were cat ears to consider. Gothic loli! Even a shrine maiden outfit! Or the evergreen “bikini armor”...

“I’m sure any of those things would look—”

“Oh, hey, I wanted to mention,” Minori-san said, interrupting me. “The girls’ school uniforms in the movie—I think red plaid for the skirt is definitely the way to go.” She clenched her fist to emphasize her point.

I imagined Myusel in a red-plaid skirt and almost reflexively clenched my fist in the exact same way.

But wait just a minute...

Huh? Did she just change the subject on me?

And... hadn’t this happened before?

Was I in danger of stepping on a land mine?

I was just giving Minori-san my most perplexed look when—

“Shinichi-sensei!”

Eduardo rushed into the library, excitedly calling my name. Sometimes the Japanese say “I’ll go wash my face” just as a figure of speech, but apparently he had really meant it, because he dashed back in with water still dripping from his hair. As if he had been in such a hurry, he hadn’t even had time to dry off.

What could have him so excited?

“What if the party to the contract and the thing that creates the interdimensional door are *both* the bad guy?!”

“Huh...? Oh... Oh, I get it.” It took me a second, but I quickly grasped what Eduardo was getting at. He was talking about our magical girl discussion. He must have had a flash of inspiration while he was busy washing.

“I like that,” I said. “When it comes to plot, simple is best. And then everything wraps up neatly at the end. Good stuff!”

“Yes, sir!” Eduardo nodded happily. He sat down across from me again, picked up his pen, and started scribbling something at a dizzying speed. It was like he could barely wait for his hand to form each individual character.

“So... and then...” he muttered, the pen whizzing. I could see where someone might think it looked a little weird. But I could see his mouth turning up; he looked like he was genuinely enjoying himself.

*Yeah. This is great*, I thought. I was all about helping this movie succeed.

Of course, because the entire “movie” thing was just a ruse, we were never going to film the complete script. I had already made sure Eduardo knew that. This was just groundwork so we could do a partial film, like a preview or trailer. But even so, he was completely caught up in the passion of creating a story.

And so I was especially eager to make this something he would be proud to be a part of—even if there wasn’t going to be much of it.

There’s no time like the present: that day in the library, Eduardo and I worked out the broad contours of the story and plot, not to mention the setting and main characters. Then I told Eduardo that, although I knew it was a lot to ask, I wanted him to pick his favorite scenes and turn them into a script in the next couple of days.

This was partly because we didn’t have much time to begin with, but it was also because Eduardo could barely contain his eagerness to move ahead with the project. My dad told me that when you’re really feeling your writing, everything comes easily, and you’re desperate to get your draft down on paper. He says it’s great. I figured that was more or less how Eduardo was feeling at that moment. Well, far be it from me to rain on his parade. I figured I would just let him pound out as much as he could.

So anyway, I left Eduardo in the library to plug away at the script, while Minori-san and I headed for Eldant Castle. The people at the castle would have been within their rights to kick us out for showing up with such a sudden request for an audience, but maybe the empress had some extra time on her hands, because we were led into a familiar audience chamber.

There were several such rooms of varying sizes in the castle, but we were brought into the smallest one, the place frequently used for personal meetings. Of course, “smallest” is relative: it was still almost twenty mats in size.

“I’m very sorry for dropping in on you, Your Majesty,” I said, bowing humbly to Petralka, who was already seated on the throne.

“We keep telling you not to act so distant with us,” Petralka said, looking less than thrilled. “And we also must apologize, for before.”

I assumed that by *before* she meant the time when she had disappeared, leaving me unable to make my morning report. Maybe the fact that she had made time for us today on such short notice was her way of apologizing.

“At any rate, Shinichi. What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“About that, Your Majesty...”

Petralka cut me off. “Again, we keep asking you to use our name, Shinichi. Nor need you speak so formally. Will you not act with us as you usually do?” She pursed her lips like a pouting child.

I guessed there was nobody around to be offended by my speaking casually to the empress. Where was the harm in relaxing a little?

“In that case... Petralka.” I gave a little cough, then said, “Enter into a contract with me and become a magical girl!”

“...What?”

“Stop that!”

*Whack.* Minori-san gave me a karate chop to the back of my head.

“Awww...”

“Just be glad I used my hand and not my Beretta.”

“Sorry...”

Sometimes, the best thing you can do is apologize.

I bowed to Petralka, who was blinking in mystification—come to think of it, she hadn’t seen *Rental ☆Madoka* yet, had she?—and said, “Um, all joking aside, I want to film a live-action drama.”

“‘Live-action drama’?” Petralka furrowed her brow, but sounded intrigued.

“Uh-huh. I mean, well, it’s a story or whatever. Made up, basically. But it’s not animated. It’s real—you’ve seen live-action movies, haven’t you, Petralka?”

“Do you mean *tokusatsu*, perchance?” the empress asked, cocking her

head and invoking the Japanese word for special effects-laden TV shows and movies.

"Yeah, more or less."

"They involve transforming and fighting evil."

"Well, there's plenty of other stuff, too."

Granted, transforming superheroes make up the bulk of tokusatsu shows. It only then dawned on me that although we had brought videos of *Kamen R**er*, *sentai* superhero stuff, and *Ult**man*, we hadn't yet imported anything that didn't involve transforming. *K-tai In***tigator 7* or the live-action version of *Sengoku BAS*RA*, that sort of thing. It was easiest to import the series with the longest runs... But never mind that.

"And what is this 'film' you speak of?"

"Oh. Uhh..."

Our magic interpreter rings could start to seem all-powerful, but when you used a word for which the other person simply had no concept, it was communicated as-is, without interpretation, and sometimes this sort of thing happened.

"It means I want us—or really, the people of the Eldant Empire—to make it. 'Filming' is what you call making a tokusatsu show."

"Really?!" Petralka leaned forward on her throne. "You wish for us to make a tokusatsu?!"

"Well, strictly speaking, it's not so much a tokusatsu as a live-action movie."

"Ho. Very interesting, that." Petralka cocked her head. "But is it all right?"

"Huh? Is what all right?"

I didn't know what she was asking, but Prime Minister Zahar, who stood next to her, explained.

"Such things are the special export of your Ja-pan, are they not, Shinichi-dono? Are you sure it's safe to reveal to us the secrets of their creation?"

".....Ah."

I finally understood. Otaku goods like this were the very lifeblood of the general entertainment company, Amutech. The company's whole modus operandi was to import anime and manga and games from Japan, sell them, and put the profits back into the business. If the Eldant people learned to

make their own otaku stuff, how would Amutech make money? That was what Petralka was asking.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's fine. The methods aren't actually that easy to imitate. Think of it as being like our last little 'festival.' Just enjoy the creation process."

The "festival" I was referring to was the soccer tournament. In point of fact, Matoba-san had insisted I not reveal the video leak to the Eldant side. If they started asking questions about why the Japanese government was trying to keep the Eldant Empire's existence a secret from its own people... well, there would be a lot of very difficult questions to answer.

I wasn't especially happy to be effectively deceiving Petralka and the others. Setting aside the specific concerns of the Japanese government, though, I was sure the Eldant Empire wouldn't be happy to hear that they had to be hidden, like dangerous animals or something. So for the time being, I went along with Matoba-san's request.

Back to the conversation.

"Very well. You have our cooperation," Petralka said, smiling with evident pleasure. "Is there anything you will need, besides the arrangement of personnel?"

"Yeah, about that. There just happens to be something I want to request of you specifically, Petralka. That's really why I came here today."

"What is it? Will you be needing a new building or something?"

"Uh, in the movie..." I took a deep breath and then let it all out at once: "I want you to play the heroine."

".....What?"

I knew it would be a surprising request, but it took quite a long time for Petralka to answer. Her big green eyes had squinted with astonishment and confusion, and her mouth hung slightly open. Finally she managed, "The heroine...?"

"Right." I nodded. "The female lead."

"You wish us to—?"

"Uh-huh."

".....Why?" she gasped. She probably never expected to be asked to take part herself.

"Shinichi-dono," Prime Minister Zahar said, looking troubled. "This is highly unorthodox—"

But this wasn't the time to back down. This was when I needed to push.

"I gave a lot of thought to who should play the main character," I said, adopting a serious expression. "This is the first movie in the history of the Eldant Empire, right? The lead has to be played by someone who reflects the importance of this moment. I think the people need to see Her Majesty the Empress in this role."

This wasn't exactly a *total* lie, but it was a bit of a fudge to make sure Petralka would go along with things.

The real reason I wanted her to play the main character was entirely personal. I pictured her sleeping in that wooden box, weeping as she dreamed of her parents. I could hardly stand thinking of it. I desperately wanted to do something for her.

If that meant helping her clear her head by becoming someone else for a while, well, maybe that would do.

At least maybe she could stop running away to cry by herself.

Obviously, if I were to say any of that to her face, Petralka would demand, "Are you making fun of us?" or say, "Don't treat us like a child!" I was sure of it.

So I covered myself with a lie.

That kind of lie can be forgiven... right?

"Hmm..."

Petralka lapsed into silent thought. For a moment, I was afraid she had seen through me already.

"Not Myusel?"

*Why would Petralka bring her up?*

"Well, Shinichi?"

"Er, I'm sorry—what are you talking about?"

"Have you come to ask us because Myusel turned you down?"

"Huh?"

My eyes went wide, and I found I had no idea how to respond. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind.

As a matter of fact, yes, I had intended to ask Myusel to be part of the production, but for a totally different role than the one in which I wanted to cast Petralka. I had never gotten further than picturing what a joy it would be to film the two beautiful girls laughing and chattering together.

"Hrm..."

Petralka appeared about to say something else, but when she saw how surprised I looked, she stopped in annoyance. She looked away from me and put her chin on her hands. She looked like a pouting child.

As for me, I replied, as gently but as clearly as I could, “No, Petralka. I’m asking you because I want you to do it.” And that was no lie. “I *have* asked Myusel to appear in the movie, but she has a completely different part from you. I haven’t asked anyone but you to play the heroine. We’ve even worked to make the script something you’ll find easy to play.”

That was true, too.

Of course, I had to be careful not to scare off Eduardo, so all I had said was, “Let’s make the main girl kind of young-looking, but also strong of spirit!”

“I don’t want anyone else for this part. I need you, Petralka.”

She was quiet for a moment, not looking at me. But finally she said, “Is... Is that so?”

For some reason, her pale cheeks had turned a blushing red.

Okay, flashback over.

Things had been progressing smoothly since all that happened. Matoba-san got us the equipment in good time, and the students at the school were quick to learn how to use it. They were accustomed to the PCs at school, and the acquaintance seemed to transfer readily to other electronic gadgets. Frankly, they were a lot better with the equipment than Matoba-san himself was.

I guess that’s just how readily teens absorb information, whether or not they’re used to computers or whatever.

And that brings us right up to the present moment.

I was going all over the capital, filming our “movie” with Petralka, Myusel, Minori-san, Elvia, and the students from the school.

Our magical-girl heroine, of course, was portrayed by Petralka.

She wore a costume tailor-made by Minori-san, and had really embraced her role as a magical girl who does battle with the JSDF. Yes, sometimes her expression was a little stiff, or her delivery a little stilted, but what could

you expect from someone who had been thrown into the production so suddenly? We could edit things later to suggest that that was just the way the character was, or that the situation demanded it.

In any event, the filming was going nicely.

So nicely, in fact, that we were all getting pretty tired.

We took breaks between shoots, of course, but that was also when we set up for the next round of filming, so the activity was constant. Petralka had just disappeared someplace on the grounds that she had to prepare for the next scene.

And so I found myself, as I tried to get an overall sense of how things were going, wandering over to our director, who was busy barking orders. Myusel, dressed in a school uniform, was with the director.

And who was this director, you ask?

"How's it going, Minori-san?"

Oh, don't act so shocked.

Minori-san was discussing something with some elf and dwarf students as they all huddled around a computer to review the footage they'd just shot.

You might wonder why we had Minori-san in the director's chair. Well, it was because she had actual filming and editing experience.

Today's cosplayers do more than just dress up. They rent studios and have photo sessions, make "image videos" that they burn to DVD or upload to video sharing sites... And above all, Minori-san had apparently made a simple movie with her friends at one point.

"There's a lot of options for video editing software these days. It's easy to just do it on a computer." (Minori-san's assessment.)

I guess that was also part of the reason why the video leak had occurred in the first place. But forget about that. I had decided to let Minori-san handle all the details.

"Ah, Shinichi-kun," Minori-san said, waving me over with a smile. "I like how this is going. You said you weren't very confident, but I think you're doing great."

"Ha ha," I said, offering a dry laugh to cover my embarrassment.

It was true: as you may have noticed from the earlier scene, even I was appearing in our little film.

It was all well and good to cast Petralka in the lead, but the question was

who would play across from her. It was going to be a pretty platonic role—no kissing or anything—but whoever filled it would still be spending a lot of time with Petralka, and would naturally have plenty of opportunities to talk to her.

Here in the Eldant Empire, a chance to get close to Her Majesty the Empress was literally the royal road to social advancement, so there were a whole lot of students who were eager to be considered for the part—or, well, more accurately, there were a whole lot of parents saying "Cast my child!" There was more than a little argument about who should get the part.

The problem was, if I cast a student, no matter who I picked, I would be inviting the resentment of every parent of every student I didn't choose.

So who was there who was about Petralka's age, but who didn't have a part in all the politicking? That was the concern that led to my being picked for the part.

And so but anyway.

"The acting is decent, the production is smooth. I'd say things are going pretty well for our first movie."

"Thank goodness," I said, letting out a relieved breath.

I certainly didn't expect a bunch of amateurs to manage to make a movie completely without a hitch, but if things were chugging along, that was the most I could ask for.

"I'm sure happy that Myusel's outfit looks every bit as good as I imagined, too," Minori-san said with a smile, glancing at the girl who now stood behind me.

"Th-Thank you very much," Myusel said, smiling shyly. "It makes me... very happy somehow, to be wearing clothes from my master's country."

*She says the sweetest things.*

"Thanks yourself," Minori-san said. "Think I could get some photos later?"

Of course, JSDF photographers were busy snapping pictures all throughout the filming process, so she obviously meant "for personal use."

"The costume worked out pretty well for Elvia, too," Minori-san said, still smiling. "I'm glad all that work on the skirt paid off."

"All that work?" I said. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen Elvia in costume yet...

“Uh-huh,” Minori-san said, glancing around the set. She spotted the beast girl nearby and called out, “Elvia! C’mere a second!”

“Sure thing.”

When I saw Elvia rushing over to us... well, my heart skipped a beat.

She was wearing a sailor uniform just like Myusel and Petralka, but what really stole my attention was the tail poking out from her plaid skirt.

“I made sure there was an opening for her tail,” Minori-san said with a note of pride.

*Dayum. This girl knows what’s going on.*

“Y’ think it looks all right?” Elvia asked, but she was unmistakably pleased. In addition to the smile on her face, her fluffy tail started wagging.

超カント

Elvia normally wore clothes that exposed a lot of skin—including her shoulders and belly button—but this very age-appropriate sailor uniform had a definite charm of its own. Actually, it was almost startling how different she seemed in it.

The sailor uniform is by definition a summer outfit, so it has short sleeves—the wearer looks ready for some fun in the sun. Plus, Elvia's skirt was on the short side, so the overall impression might normally seem a bit rough around the edges—but compared to her typical appearance, this outfit actually made her look very mature. Very much the studious female student. And I had zero objections to that.

"Yeah, I think it looks great."

"You mean it?!" The tail started going faster and faster, *whap whap whap whap whap*.

Elvia was an easy personality to understand, if nothing else.

"This is my first time wearing something like this, and I kinda like it."

She did a little spin right there in front of us. Each time she turned, a pair of black leggings was briefly visible. Yeah—very energizing. That's the stuff.

"By the way, how do you feel about this for the transformation scene?" Minori-san asked, turning the liquid-crystal display toward me. On-screen was a still image of Petralka transforming, partially touched up with CGI.

That's right: we were deliberately adding computer effects. Purposefully making an actual transformation scene look faked.

Petralka's transformation was achieved using magic. That is, people just off-camera were using wind and light spells, while Petralka's costumes had been designed to be easy to get into and out of quickly. That was the "transformation": a quick change of clothes.

"I think it's good. We have to be careful not to make it too obvious, or that would be suspicious in itself."

"You're right," Minori-san said. "We'll go with something like this, then." She saved the image. Presumably they would do the rest of the frames later.

Incidentally, it was Loek and Romilda, leading teams of elf and dwarf students, who were responsible for the special effects (by which I mean magic). Given how readily (if sort of accidentally) they had replicated the crazy stuff from soccer shows with their spells, I showed them some

magical-girl anime and asked if they could manage something that looked like that. And lo and behold, they had.

Anyway—

"Shinichi-kun, you need a different costume for the next scene. Go get changed," Minori-san said, consulting a filming schedule on her computer.

"Oh, sure," I said, starting off. It was only then that I realized Elvia and Myusel had disappeared somewhere along the line. Elvia might come and go, but it was unusual for Myusel to leave my side without saying anything. I wondered where she had gotten to.

Well, maybe she had needed to use the facilities. You know, the sort of thing she might not want to just announce. I decided not to worry too much.

"Uh... Oh, there it is."

On a hill several minutes' walk from the filming location, a changing area had been set up. A forest came right up to the foot of the hill, so some cloth had been draped from the branches to create a simple changing area. I checked my watch to find I didn't have even five minutes left in our break. I had to hurry up and change.

Pressed for time, I pulled open the door (er, the sheet) of the changing room...

...and made a very startled noise.

As did Myusel, who was standing right in front of me, half-naked.

Her pale skin was gloriously visible, her legs white, her—oh! Her chest, surprisingly large, just like Petralka said, and—

NO! No! Now is not the time!

I suppose you saw this coming.

I had run smack into Myusel in the changing room.

Whenever I came as an impartial observer to this sort of scene in a manga or anime or whatever, I always felt like the hero or heroine didn't have to get so bent out of shape about it, which they inevitably did. But now that it was happening to me personally, my head felt as hot as if someone had climbed into my brain and built a bonfire. I was definitely not in a position to say anything coherent.

Myusel reflexively clutched her familiar dress to herself, hiding her underwear-clad body, but her shoulders and thighs remained exposed.

And to top it all off...

"Huh? Shinichi-sama?"

As Myusel and I stood there, frozen, who should appear to size us up but Elvia.

She had already dispensed with her sailor suit, leaving her in the sports bra and sports shorts (?) she had been wearing underneath. Unlike Myusel, however, she had no impulse to hide her body, and finding me there didn't seem to bother her at all.

Of course, I guess half-naked was par for the course for this girl.

Still, in my world, seeing someone in their underwear definitely created the excitement—to say nothing of the guilt—of seeing something you sort of shouldn't.

"You here to change too, Shinichi-sama?"

"Er, no, I mean—I didn't—I'm sor—"

"Ah. You've come at a good moment, Shinichi."

The (all-too-predictable) hits just kept coming. It was Petralka.

She was wearing undergarments of her own—a camisole and shorts—but she also approached me with no sign of embarrassment, holding out a uniform.

"Help us. The 'trans-for-may-shun scene' happens in the space of a moment, but un-transforming has proven more time-consuming."

*Er, Your Majesty, would a little royal modesty be too much to ask?*

Even as the thought crossed my mind, though, I remembered that in this world, nobles and royals had people help them change clothes all the time. When I first arrived here, Myusel had tried to help me change as if it were the most natural thing in the world, leading to an awkward moment.

But wait, wouldn't you normally have someone of the same gender help you? A woman might conceivably help a man with his clothes, but the opposite was sexual harassment no matter how you sliced it—or was that just another bias that I brought over from my own world? Come to think of it, Edo-era baths were normally mixed-gender, so—wait, is that even relevant? Argh! This wasn't making sense anymore!

"Ah... Er, I... I just..."

Three girls stood in front of me in their underwear.

I was a former home security guard (read: zero romantic history), and I was feeling distinctly overstimulated. It would have been more surprising if I *hadn't* been pretty flustered. Myusel aside, though, Petralka and Elvia seemed perplexed as to why I was standing there frozen.

“What are you waiting for, Shinichi? Come here and help us.”

“Somethin’ the matter, Shinichi-sama?”

“Er, ah...”

It was no use. *Wait, if you get that close to me I’ll gaaaaaakwaa w □ drftgy □□□ lp?!*

And so on and so forth. My internal monologue became a garbled mess.

“M-Master,” Myusel said, seeming to have determined to do something. I definitely felt like this was a big help. After the way we were introduced all that time ago, she had a sense of how people from my world felt when it came to changing clothes. The fact that she tried to cover herself when I stumbled in was proof of that. I was sure she could resolve this situation and save my neck.

“Myu—Myusel...”

*Help me.*

I unconsciously reached out my hand toward her.

“Master... If it’s what you desire, I...”

Her face was bright red now; she squeezed her eyes shut and clutched the dress even harder. Then, with one shaking hand, she began to lower it...

“Just a—!”

*Wait, Myusel! I think there’s a grave misunderstanding here!*

*I swear I didn’t come here just to peep, or see you all naked, or whatever!*

“I’m very, very sorrryyyy!” I howled, then I scrambled out of that place so fast I was practically falling over myself. In fact, I literally fell on my way out. I didn’t have the time to be getting up off the ground!

Ahhhhhhh. Talk about your panic situations.

I tumbled about ten meters, getting covered in leaf mold, until I rolled right out from among the trees and was finally able to sit up.

On reflection, the standard response to that situation would have just been to say “Sorry,” and turn around. But I was so frantic that I hadn’t even thought of that; in fact, I had gawked at the girls’ bare skin.

*Arrgh. How embarrassing.*

It was just—everyone reacted totally different from how I expected! Don’t heroines always scream when this happens in light novels and manga and anime? If they had been kind enough to scream, it would have brought me back to myself, and then—

“...Huh.”

My nose tickled—I could feel something soft and warm on it. I reflexively touched it with my hand, to discover my nose was bleeding.

Yikes! Way uncool! Why would that be the one part of the script that I managed to follow?! No! No, I’m sure my nose must’ve started bleeding when I fell. It definitely wasn’t from the shock and excitement of seeing Myusel and the others all but naked...

“U—Um, Shinichi-sama?”

Elvia popped out of the changing area, still happily in an advanced state of undress, to see how I was doing.

“What happened back there?”

“Nothing happened! I’m just fine, so get back in there and change!” I exclaimed, practically weeping.

And so, as you can see, the filming wasn’t without its little hiccups. But for the most part, things were going pretty well.

Obviously, we couldn’t just shut down the school while we were doing this, so in principle filming was limited to after school hours. But because of some top-notch scheduling by Minori-san (and Matoba-san, too), the work as such was clicking along. That’s a bureaucrat for you: managing time and people is their business, and they may not know much, but they sure know that.

And so...

“How’s it going, Shinichi-kun?”

I turned toward the voice, which belonged to Minori-san. She was coming my way.

I was only in charge of classes during the morning, so in the afternoon I joined forces with some students who had nothing else to do in order to put some props through their paces.

“I think it looks real good,” I said, pointing.

Minori-san glanced in the direction I indicated and promptly looked taken aback. “A dragon and... wyverns?”

“Well, the dragon is fake,” I said with a wry grin.

Standing out in the field behind the school was a gigantic dragon. It had horns, fangs, claws. Even wings. Everything was arranged for the most fearsome possible effect, designed to be terrifying to anyone who might face it down. Plus, the scales were red, like blood. If you ran into one by yourself in the woods somewhere, you would probably wet your pants. A true *kaijuu* (big ol' monster: think Godzilla) if there ever was one.

The only catch was, it wasn't real.

It was effectively a model, on a true-to-life scale.

Pulling our 1:1 dragon with a pair of ropes, however, were several visibly smaller dragons. They were a familiar sight around Eldant Castle, and if you looked up in the sky, you might occasionally see them patrolling the Empire's territory. Wyverns.

When I found out that the parent of one of my pupils belonged to the Dragon Knights, and that they kept wyverns at home, I arranged to borrow a few of them.

As for the model dragon, I asked a dwarf parent to help make it with magic—an excellent project for someone skilled in construction and metalworking. So the dragon was actually built on a thin metal frame; it was hollow inside. It looked awfully heavy from here, but we could move it around with just two or three wyverns.

"Shinichi-sensei, it's all set!" reported some students who were checking over the model.

"Great! Do just like we talked about, then!"

"Sure!" The students nodded.

Another group of kids, who had been standing by, mounted the wyverns, taking up their reins and whistling. The wyverns slowly stirred into motion, spreading their wings and then launching themselves into the sky.

And then...

"Action!"

On my cue, a student in charge of filming started up a tripod camera. It was pointed right at the dragon, which had begun to rise lazily into the air.

For reference, Minori-san was the director, but I was handling effects.

".....Piano wire?" Minori-san whispered from beside me.

"Wire-based practical effects," I said. "The heart and soul of any Japanese tokusatsu show!" I made a fist to underline my point.

The method was simple: attach piano wire to something, then lift it up

so it appears to be flying. In the Japanese filmmaking industry, it practically constituted a traditional art of its own. These days, stuff like motion-control cameras saw such classical approaches on the decline, but they were still alive and well in the independent scene. Expert practitioners could make almost anything look like it was flying—not just airplanes and other mechanical objects, but even models of birds.

So the approach was conventional. It was just the wyverns that were maybe a little unusual.

"No good! No good! It's off-balance!" I shouted from beside the camera. "It doesn't look like it's flying! Let's go again!"

"Yessir!"

"This won't work, the movement of the head is unnatural! It needs to be more like, *graaah!*, so you're all *waaah!*"

"*Graaah!* so that we go *waaah!*, got it!"

"The right wing is drooping! What are you doing?!"

"Sorry about that!"

Minori-san silently watched me dispense instructions to the students for a while before she finally said, "You're really into this, huh, Shinichi-kun?"

"Huh? Oh, I just... You know. Once I get started, I really enjoy it." I scratched my cheek.

Any Japanese person would know the feeling. I was like a kid at a culture fest. Although to be fair, since I had stopped going to high school almost as soon as I started, I only knew middle-school culture fests personally.

"All right, cut! Bring the dragon back down here and let's check it over!"

I glanced at the computer hooked up to the camera to see how the footage had come out.

Good, good. At a glance, the dragon really seemed to be flying. But when I enlarged it, while the image became a bit grainier, something that appeared to be piano wire cut straight through the middle of the frame. Excellent. It was exactly unnatural enough.

This was exactly what I wanted.

"Wow." Minori-san was checking out the image from behind me.

"We even got the dragon's footprints," I said. "We had a foot made and used it to put prints on the ground."

The whole hand-made thing, the analog feeling around here, was electric.

There was definitely a part of me that realized how ridiculous this all was: we were using *actual wyverns* to lift a *fake* dragon into the air. Bass-ackwards, I know. But I had given it a lot of thought, and this was the best way.

Actually, it turned out that faking evidence was a lot of fun. (Don't listen to him, kids.)

"I get it. But hey, Shinichi-kun?"

"Yes?"

"I'm very sorry to say this when you're working so hard, but..."

"Yes?"

"Couldn't we just do it with CGI or something?"

I was silent.

Minori-san was silent.

Meanwhile, students were busily imprinting footprints, checking on the model, making sure it was airworthy. Somewhere a bird was singing, oblivious to all of this.

"......Don't you think that in this digital age, when the computer is all-powerful, people will flock to something analog, that shows the warmth of real human creation?"

"......Maybe."

I knew my logic was convoluted, but Minori-san was kind enough to let me have this one.

Before I knew it, the sun was setting on the far side of the horizon. Pink light spilled over the hills, covering us in a dull glow. It was a feeling I remembered well from childhood: like the world itself was telling you, *It's been a fun day, but it's over now; time to go home*. There was a sweet sadness to it.

"I guess we've just got another day or two left," I said softly, reviewing in my head what we had filmed so far.

Of course, it was hardly a bad thing that everything had gone according

to plan. If all continued to go smoothly, then we would wrap on filming tomorrow or the day after. It had been a frantic but oddly fulfilling time, and it was about to end. Of course, then there was the work of editing to do...

I fell quiet. At the moment, everyone was on break. The hilltop was pretty busy, with students chatting happily, munching on snacks to keep their tummies from rumbling, just in general having a good time. They weren't even just hanging together by race. There were several groups that included both elves and dwarves. They didn't look like they were quite used to it yet, but all the same, everyone was smiling.

The members of the JSDF had shown up to help today, too, and some of the groups included them as well, everyone laughing together.

*Ahh.* This is what promoting friendship and understanding is supposed to be. Phew!

It might seem funny given how long the school had been operating, but I felt like I was only just now realizing how important it was. I know some people think online education is plenty, but this sort of experience, with everyone accomplishing something together and having a grand old time, is something you can only get at a brick-and-mortar school.

Here, everyone was gaining shared experience in the pursuit of a particular goal. That made me really... happy, somehow.

At that moment, my eyes met those of Eduardo, who had written our script. We both smiled, but which of us was first? It was impossible to say.

Eduardo, and several other students with him, came up to me.

"Shinichi-sensei, I'm really enjoying this."

"Watching anime is great and all, but... making something ourselves like this is real nice, too."

"Why just do a part of a movie? Let's do the whole thing!" someone else suggested. All the students had big, bright smiles.

Seeing how excited they all were, my heart ached to think we were doing all this just to throw people off about a leaked video clip.

Then Eduardo twisted the knife: "Actually, I've written the complete script!" He produced a stack of paper from the bag on his back. It did indeed appear to be the full version of the story we had come up with.

Hang on... *"Actually, I've got it already!"* What are you, kid, a cub manga artist?

“That’s cool,” I said with a weak smile, “but we just don’t have time...”

“Awww.” The students looked very pouty and unhappy. I tried to calm them down.

“Huh?” At that moment, though, I caught sight of Petralka at the edge of my vision. She was heading toward the lip of the hill, from where you could look down over the entire production site. I excused myself from the group of students and headed after the empress.

She was just looking around, but seemed to have something on her mind.

“Petralka?” I said, at which she turned around. “Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No,” she said with a shake of her head.

I came up and stood next to her. The sunset was especially beautiful from this spot. The clear blue of the cloudless sky mingled with the fiery colors of sunset to produce a startling palette in the heavens.

“We simply thought this was... quite lovely,” Petralka whispered, looking at the sunset. “Of late, we had been forgetting to see what was around us.”

Seeing her face in profile, I was lost for words. Here she was, essentially confessing to me just how much of a mental corner she’d been chased into by her life as empress.

“Shinichi.”

“Yes?”

“We have quite enjoyed ourselves.”

She turned to me, a gentle smile on her face. The kind of expression you only get when the emotion is completely spontaneous. Come to think of it... This might have been the first time I had ever seen her smile like that. There was always a certain tension in Petralka’s behavior. Even when she smiled, it was the empress smiling.

“We did not expect acting to be so much fun.” Her silver hair, fluttering gently in the wind, caught the evening light. “It is as you said—we feel we have taken on a different self.” Those emerald eyes narrowed happily.

There were no knights or serving girls around us, and we weren’t in the castle. Maybe that was why the Petralka in front of me at that moment seemed less like an empress than she did just a young girl. She looked... normal.

“We thank you, Shinichi.”

“Wow...”

I nodded. Dealing with the leak was great and all, but I had been hoping to help Petralka feel better on top of that. I didn’t know if we would pull off the cover-up, but at least I seemed to have achieved my second objective. And that made me happy, too.

Petralka and I stood together, not speaking, gazing at the sky. Almost before we knew it, the sun had sunk out of sight, and stars began to glitter above us in the night sky.

# Chapter Three: The Party's Over

Today was to be the last day of shooting.

We were gathered on our usual hilltop—but we were all looking at each other with troubled expressions.

We couldn't start filming.

The reason? Our lead actress was missing.

"Is Petralka not here yet?" I asked.

"Usually, she's earlier than any of us," Minori-san said from beside me, equally perplexed.

She was right: every other day, Petralka had been here long before I arrived after the end of classes; she would be standing there with her back turned to her bodyguards and the JSDF people who were helping with the shoot, chiding, "You are late, Shinichi."

But now even her personal escort of knights didn't know where she was.

"Do you suppose something's happened?" Myusel said worriedly from my other side. I was silent. I certainly couldn't deny the possibility.

After all, at bottom, she was Her Majesty the Empress. She was one of the most important people in the Eldant Empire, and such a likely target of assassins that she even had anti-magic patterns on her body.

We hadn't specifically announced that we were filming in this location, but we hadn't been treating the information as absolutely top secret, either. I mean, even Elvia was on set here. As much as I thought it unlikely, it was impossible to rule out a kidnapping or even an assassination—attacks that would give us far more to worry about than just finishing our movie.

I couldn't stop the unpleasant thoughts from swirling in my head.

"Uh, Minori-san, I'm going to go over to the castle..."

"What, now?"

"We can't start filming without Petralka anyway, right?"

She was the star, after all. There were some scenes we could do that didn't include her, but the atmosphere on the set was just different with her around. Minori-san and I might have been officially running the place, but

Petralka was without question the beating heart of our film effort.

"Hmm..." Minori-san looked concerned for a moment, but then, to my relief, nodded. "Okay. I'll come, too. Myusel, can you handle things here?"

"Y-Yes, I can." Myusel nodded.

I looked around, then pointed at the sky over our collective heads. "I don't like these clouds!" I bellowed. "So everybody hunker down until we get some better ones!"

The response from the students was simple: "Huh?"

Fair enough, I guess.

"Look who's a big, important director," Minori-san said.

"I'm surprised you recognize it."

"My dad was nuts for Kurosawa movies."

"I always wanted to say that once. Er, we'll be leaving the set for a while, so everybody, do whatever you can in the meantime! And if you can't do anything, just hang tight!"

"Yessir!" came the enthusiastic response.

The students set about their work, and Minori-san and I made for the JSDF LAV parked beside the hill.

Despite the abruptness of our visit, Minori-san and I were admitted into the castle. Inside, things were pretty calm; it sure didn't look like they thought anything had happened to Petralka. After all, we already knew how that looked, and nobody would have had time for us then.

That was a relief to me, but it left us with the question of why Petralka hadn't shown up at the set.

Minori-san and I stood whispering outside the audience chamber as we waited for the empress.

"Maybe she just forgot we were filming today?" I said.

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't expect to wait so long to see her," Minori-san replied.

Typically, Petralka was waiting in the audience chamber to receive us, but today it was sort of the opposite. Of course, that was understandable, given how suddenly we had requested to see her, but it was still slightly

unusual.

Finally, the door opened, and Petralka could be seen on the other side. Standing beside her was the knight Garius. Prime Minister Zahar was nowhere to be seen, but still, it was a perfectly normal sight.

And yet Petralka, who didn't say a word, was obviously unhappy. She sat on the throne with a sullen look on her face, resting her chin on her hands. Garius looked more or less impassive, as always, but I thought it was possible to detect a hint of irritation in his expression.

You could cut the tension with a knife. Had something happened? Minori-san and I looked at each other.

But then Garius said, "We know why you're here. I am sorry, but Her Highness will no longer be participating in your fyl-ming."

"Huh...?" I said, dumbfounded.

Petralka, however, exclaimed, "Garius, we will speak for ourself!"

The minister seemed to ignore her; his focus remained on me. "Your fyl-ming has caused Her Highness's public duties to languish. We can turn a blind eye to the occasional laxity... But this cannot go any further."

"W-Wait, but... P-Petralka, didn't you say it was all right?"

She didn't answer me. Around here, absence of refusal was tantamount to confirmation. But...

"It was just two or three hours after classes each day," I protested. Back when I had first come to the Eldant Empire, Petralka had spent nearly that much time at my house on an almost daily basis. I couldn't see how this was so different.

"But the influence of those hours cannot be confined to them," Garius said. He explained that while Petralka was attending to her duties at the castle, she seemed constantly distracted—if he took his eyes off her for one second, she was suddenly reading a script, or fiddling with one of her costumes. Further, he said, she was obviously exhausted—once she had even fallen asleep in the audience chamber in the middle of a discussion with her advisors.

"So you're saying..."

I glanced at Minori-san, who nodded. She seemed to have come to the same conclusion. In a word, Petralka had simply become too wrapped up in the filmmaking.

It's a common enough story, and not just in the world of movies.

Sometimes a person gets too into some hobby, going so far as to change the way they live to accommodate it. It can go so far that the hobby becomes the most important thing to them. They quit their job or stop coming to school, cut off relations with their friends, and even grow distant from their family, becoming completely engrossed in whatever it is that has their attention.

Now, of course, sometimes people manage to parlay these hobbies into paying work. My parents were a classic case.

But the reality is that far, far more often, these things end in failure—a person gives everything they have to their interest, only to end up burned-out and empty. If the person recognizes what's going on, sometimes that's enough. The problems start when all this stuff begins to have an effect on the people around the person with the obsession.

Think of a grown man with a wife and kids, for example. Or, say, Petralka right here and now.

"It so happens that there has been a particularly large number of pressing concerns of late," Garius said.

Apparently, the kingdom of Bahairam, a neighboring country with whom the Eldant Empire was at war, had been behaving provocatively, and Garius and others were wracking their brains about what to do about it. He claimed that a small number of Bahairamanian special-ops units had been making lightning-quick incursions across the border. It wasn't enough to change the tide of the war or anything, but if they weren't careful, one of those units might get dangerously close to the Eldant capital.

On top of that, there had been eyewitness sightings of a dragon in the vicinity of the capital.

It hadn't done any damage yet, but we were talking about something bigger than a wyvern—an aggressive, violent carnivore. Very dangerous, Garius said. If there really was a dragon in the area, they would have to organize a hunting party posthaste. But given the pressure from Bahairam, no one could agree how much manpower the royal forces could spare to deal with the wayward drake.

And so on and so forth.

As I listened, I had to agree that all of these situations sounded awfully dire, and that whoever might have to handle the details, the broad contours of the problems definitely had to be addressed by the empress. So far, none

of these issues had resulted in any harm to the empire, but they could easily develop into something where people's lives hung in the balance.

"Whatever the case, this isn't good," I said.

"That's for sure," Minori-san said.

Much as I hated to admit it, there were a lot of people among the ranks of the otaku who had "gone too far" like I described above. Cosplayers went to enough events that I was sure Minori-san knew more than a few people like that herself.

"Well... It's not like we were ever planning to film an entire movie, anyway."

In fact, Minori-san had already given Matoba-san several clips to use as "secondary leaks." To convince people that this was really a stealth marketing campaign for a new movie, we had to release a certain amount of material—enough that people would start to lose interest.

From that perspective, the more stuff we could film, the better, but there was no bright line dividing "not enough material" from "too much." We would work out the kinks in post.

"Okay," I said to Garius. "Minori-san and I will figure out some way to __"

"You will not!" Petralka shouted.

I looked at her, more than a little rattled, to find she had jumped up from her throne.

"We shall not abide any such thing!"

"B-But—"

"We are not to be argued with!" Petralka said, stamping her foot on the floor. She was the very picture of a tantruming child: she shook her head back and forth to emphasize her point, her long silver hair, tied off into tails, flowing through the air.

Come to think of it...

*When did Petralka start wearing her hair like that all the time?*

Her hair wasn't simply down, as it usually was; it was in the twintail style, similar to Myusel's, that she wore on set. The 'do looked good on her, but it was also a distinctive feature of her role as "the magical girl." If she wasn't changing her hair back, maybe it was a sign that she was losing her grip on the distinction between on-set and off.

This was bad.

I had dragged Petralka into this hoping it would help her feel a little better, but I hadn't expected it to be as "effective" as this.

"No! No! No! No! NO!"

"Your Majesty—"

"It isn't *done* yet!" Petralka shrieked, as if to crush Garius's words with her exclamation.

"Petralka, it's all right. I'm sure Minori-san and I can figure out a way to __"

"We disavow any filming done in our absence!"

I had nothing to say to that.

Instead, Garius spoke up, trying to sound reasonable. "Your Majesty, there are a great many matters you must attend to." His voice was soft, but firm. "As Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, this is your—"

"Nuh-uh! We won't!" Her voice was like a slap.

"Your Majesty..."

"We are sick and tired of being—"

"Majesty!"

Garius's voice was no longer gentle; it was sharp as a sword. He was not going to let her finish that sentence. The thought of what she was about to say angered him, and you could hear it.

Petralka fell quiet, brought up short by the rebuke. A painful silence descended upon the audience chamber.

*What should I do...?*

I was, frankly, panicking inside. No matter how you cut it, this was my fault, and it was up to me to do something about it. But at the moment, Petralka seemed likely to rebuff anything I said out of sheer spite.

"Your Majesty... If I may be so bold?"

It was an unexpected voice that broke the silence.

"Minori-san?" I asked. I wasn't the only one who was taken aback: Petralka and Garius were both looking at her as if they didn't quite understand what was going on. To this point, although Minori-san frequently accompanied me into the audience chamber as my bodyguard, she had never once spoken directly to Petralka.

"Your words at this moment, Your Majesty, are impossibly irresponsible." Petralka's eyes went as wide as dinner plates, but Minori-san forged ahead. "I understand how much you want to keep enjoying the

filming. Believe me, I do. I've had more than a little fun with it, myself. But it's so engaging precisely because it's just a way of passing an all-too-short moment."

"What is it you're saying...?"

"Please think, Your Majesty. Compare that 'magical girl' to the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. One is real, and the other... well, isn't."

"W-Well..."

"It's exactly your obvious difference from your predecessors that allows all of us to appreciate your constant kindness. If you forget about what's real, how will we ever get you back? If you insist on turning your back on the reality in front of you—if you lose yourself in fantasy—how will it profit you as Empress?"

Minori-san's expression was clear and calm as she spoke.

"Will you abandon who you are, and take on a fake identity instead?"

She didn't shout her question—but in the noiseless room, her voice seemed louder than even Petralka and Garius's yelling.

The empress and her advisor were both absolutely quiet. Even I knew enough to keep my mouth shut.

Finally, Petralka let out a kind of half-choke and slumped back onto her throne. Her hands gripped her knees as if to keep her planted there, and she wouldn't look up. Her hair hid her face, so it was impossible to say exactly what her expression was at that moment...

"Er, u-um!" I spoke up, desperate to escape the overwhelming tension in the room. "Let's devote today to business, okay?"

Petralka said nothing.

"We'll call off the shoot for now. I'm sure everyone's tired from working so many days in a row."

Still she didn't speak.

"O-Okay, then! Let's call it here for today," I said, bowing my head and hoping this would serve as a neat conclusion.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Minori-san had her head bowed, as well. "Excuse us, Your Majesty!" she said. Then both of us turned smartly on our heels and exited the audience chamber.

I glanced back just as the door was closing. Petralka was still sitting on her throne, still looking at the ground, not so much as glancing after us. I figured she might be feeling a bit betrayed right then.

I understood what she was experiencing.

Not, obviously, the pressure of being an empress; that, I had to leave to my imagination. But the simple happiness that came from working on our "movie."

*But... I'm sure Minori-san's right*, I thought.

There was a definite difference between getting away for a while and trying to escape reality.

A former home security guard like me ought to know that better than anyone.

The moon was noticeably bright that evening. I was staring vaguely out the window into the cloudless night sky.

A sigh escaped me.

"Sigh..."

Filming for the day had been hastily canceled. I didn't really mind that much; it wasn't going to do us any harm. In fact, with everything going so smoothly, we were on track to finish sooner than expected. Taking a day or two off might actually help keep everything harmonious.

"But what am I gonna do?"

The problems would come after that.

We could finish the filming, but would Petralka accept what we had done? It would be possible to hurry and finish the shoot without her, but that would probably just encourage her to nurse a grudge that had no outlet. It's human nature to want to see through something you've started.

But we couldn't let Petralka just get completely wrapped up in moviemaking, either. You hardly had to look at the annals of history to know that a ruler who let personal interests override concerns of state was demonstrating a classic case of bad leadership. When prosperous empires waned and fell, it was often under the influence of just such a ruler throwing domestic politics and economics into disarray.

Not that I thought Petralka was that far gone, but if she went on like this, it wouldn't surprise me if some group coalesced seeking to remove her from the throne. Her own parents' deaths had been on account of a struggle for

the succession. It was very likely that there were still elements within the Eldant Empire set on resisting her rule.

"It may be 'just a hobby,' but it's still a hobby," I said to myself. As an otaku, I had heard my own interests derided with the expression "just a hobby" plenty of times, and I hated it. But at the same time, letting a personal pastime take over to the point where it posed a danger to your life was highly questionable. In that sense, Minori-san's distinction between the real and the fake, fantasy and reality, hit home.

A breath of fresh air helps because you only take one. Sweets are tasty because you only have a little between meals. Wait... Is that right? No, yeah. I'm sure it is. I think.

"Ahh..." I let out another long breath.

Just at that moment, someone knocked on the door of my room.

"Yes? Come in," I said, turning.

I had a pretty good idea who it was—and just as I expected, Myusel poked her head in hesitantly from the hallway.

"What's up?"

It was already pretty late.

"I saw that the lights were still on in your room, so..." Myusel entered as she spoke. "If you're having trouble sleeping, I thought... If you like..."

She was carrying a tray with a mug of some kind of steaming liquid on it. At first I thought it might be tea, but it didn't smell like it.

"Thank you," I said. "But... what's this?"

"Warm milk," she said, placing the mug on my desk. "Minori-san told me it's good to drink before you go to sleep."

"Oh, yeah. I've heard the same thing."

Milk, just slightly warmed, was easy on the stomach and helped alleviate any sense of hunger. Plus, the amino acids it contained prompted the brain to release sleep hormones. That was the story, anyway.

It was like some kind of super-drink.

"Thanks, Myusel. Sorry for always putting you to all this trouble."

"Not at all." Her expression, which had been slightly concerned, softened like a blossoming flower. I suppose she had been worried that she had overstepped herself—that's just the kind of person my maid was.

But how could I consider this to be any kind of imposition? To have such a beautiful young woman go out of her way to make this drink for me

—the thought alone was enough to set my heart dancing with happiness. She could have made me vegetable juice, or tea made from fish wort—let alone hot milk—and I would have gulped it down with a smile on my face!

I drank the milk in a single swallow, and nodded.

“Delicious.”

It was warm, and faintly sweet. She had probably added a little sugar. I could definitely see where this would quiet a growling stomach and help you sleep.

“That was good. But maybe you could make a little more of it next time.”

“Oh... Was there not enough?”

“Not quite. And you’ll need to bring another cup, too.”

“Another—?”

“I want you to share it with me. Since you’ve gone to the trouble.”

“Oh...! But I—I mean, is that all right?” Myusel asked, blushing.

*Gosh, she really does hesitate in everything she does, doesn't she? What a modest young woman.*

"It tastes really good. Or did you already try some before you brought it to me?" I said teasingly.

To my surprise, Myusel gave a ginger nod. "I always try what I make, to make sure it tastes all right, and to check for poison."

"Poison?!" I said, a little shocked.

Myusel explained that this was standard procedure for maids working in a noble household (or any household on that level). I had to admit, the most frequent tool I heard about in stories of power struggles was definitely poison. Some claimed that poison had killed more people throughout human history than any other weapon.

Come to think of it, hadn't Petralka's parents died by poison? That just went to show what a common danger it was for nobles and rich people here.

It wasn't so different in our world: I heard once that silver was popular for dining utensils in the Middle Ages because it would change color if exposed to poison, thereby alerting the diner to the danger. That's also supposedly what gave rise to the popular notion that silver could kill monsters.

But anyway...

"Wait... So every time, with all our food, you—"

"Yes, of course," Myusel said.

Even though she made the food herself, there was always the possibility that the serving utensils she had been brought could have poison on them, or that some bottle of spices might have been changed out for something much more dangerous. So as a rule, Myusel would taste the food, wait half an hour or so, and if she still felt okay, then she would start cooking for the rest of us.

What a lot of work!

"But, Master... What's the matter?" Myusel fixed me with a probing look.

"Huh?"

"Oh, I mean... What's keeping you awake so late?"

"Oh, that... Sorry to worry you."

"No, not at all." Myusel shook her head.

"Maybe I could trouble you to talk with me for a few minutes?"

“Of course—it would make me, er, very happy if I could serve as your conversation partner.” Myusel looked down shyly.

We often bottle up our worries, keeping them to ourselves and trying to act as if nothing’s wrong. Frankly, that’s exactly why they’re worrisome. When you share those sorts of concerns with someone else, you can find solutions coming from unexpected places.

And so I told Myusel all of it: how I had invited Petralka to be part of the filming in hopes that it would make her feel better. How she had gotten so into it that she ended up neglecting her work. How I wanted to honor her feelings, but had the distinct sense that things couldn’t go on like this.

I’m sure my explanation was awkward. Maybe it didn’t even make complete sense. But Myusel listened quietly to me the entire time.

Finally...

“You’re really... very kind, aren’t you, Shinichi-sama?”

She said it as if it were so simple, so obvious.

“Huh? I don’t—I don’t really think so, no...”

I knew Myusel often said that sort of thing about me, but it really wasn’t true. I was just doing what I enjoyed, what seemed good to me.

“It is true. You think about the people around you, so much that it starts to upset you. I think... I don’t quite know how to put this into words, but I think that’s amazing.”

She may have stumbled slightly over her words, but Myusel’s eyes were fixed firmly on me.

I looked away, starting to get embarrassed.

“But... I also understand how Her Majesty feels,” Myusel said, her face clouding slightly.

The difference in their social status was so great that it was impossible to say that Myusel and Petralka were friends, exactly—but what with this and that, they had a good relationship. In her own way, Myusel was probably worried about Petralka, too.

“I’ve enjoyed pretending to be someone else, myself...”

“You too, huh?”

“Yes.”

I doubt there’s anyone anywhere who’s completely satisfied with everything about themselves. To a greater or lesser extent, we all have some kind of inferiority complex.

That’s why we go head over heels for something different, or discover a work we enjoy, and project ourselves into it. It’s certainly not a bad thing. In fact, it can give us an ideal to work towards, which helps give us hope.

“Knowing where to draw the line can be tough, huh?” I said.

“Yes,” Myusel agreed, nodding.

I still didn’t have any firm idea of what I was going to do, but as I felt the warmth from the milk spread through me, I looked back out the window, up into the night sky.

An hour or so later.

Myusel had gone back to her room; she was probably already asleep.

“I can’t sleep, though...”

I sat up in bed with a sigh.

I groped my way along the edge of the bed until I found the chest sitting to one side. I reached out and flicked the bellflower-shaped antique with my finger. The magical object immediately began to emit a soft glow, providing the room with dim illumination.

“Sorry,” I said, apologizing to the sprites inside for startling them. Then I slowly got down from my bed. I had already done quite a bit of fruitless tossing and turning; I might as well try taking a walk around the mansion to clear my head.

I left my room, trying to be as quiet as possible.

“Hm...”

The hallway wasn’t completely dark, but had lights on the wall at regular intervals. They were oil lamps that were left burning all night—essentially a cousin of the lantern. Naturally, they didn’t give off the bright, bold light of an electric lamp, but only just enough of a glow that you could sort of see where you were going.

I instinctively leaned forward a little, trying to be careful of what was underfoot. I walked like that, slightly hunched over, through the dim mansion. With many a sigh, I rounded a corner and—

“Yikes!”

—ran into something soft.

*Hm? I recognize this feeling...*

"Shinichi-kun?"

"M-Minori-san?!"

Despite my surprise, I put the pieces together.

*I get it. It's Minori-san's boobs. No wonder it seemed familiar!*

I scrambled backwards even as these one-step-away-from-being-sued-for-sexual-harassment thoughts ran through my mind. Apparently, Minori-san had just happened to be coming around the corner from the other direction at that exact moment.

"What's up? It's awfully late."

"Oh, I just couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd take a little walk and—wait, what about you?"

As the question left my mouth, I noticed something: Minori-san wasn't in her usual military uniform, but in battle gear. In fact, her entire body was covered in a thin sweat.

"Same here," she said and shrugged.

"Uh... in full combat gear, though?"

"Oh... It's just easy to move in. I always dress like this at night."

"You mean they're your pajamas?"

"No! It's kind of... instead of a *gi*."

She looked almost shy as she spoke. *Wooh! How refreshing is it to see that kind of expression from Minori-san?*

"A *gi*?"

"Sure. You know, a martial arts uniform."

"A-ha..."

Given that Minori-san was a member of the JSDF, it made good sense that she might wear a martial arts *gi*. The incident with the "assembly of patriots" had already alerted me to her considerable fighting abilities.

"Right after I wake up and right before I go to bed, I always do a little light training. Just a set of basic kata. It's what I've done ever since I was a kid, so it's like... If I don't do it, I actually have trouble sleeping."

"Since you were a kid?"

Meaning these fighting skills were something she had acquired before joining the military.

Minori-san gave me an ambiguous smile, but didn't say anything else. Maybe it was her way of telling me not to press the subject.

She put her back to the wall, her smile growing a little bit pained.

"Stupid me. Maybe I went too far today."

"Huh? What are we talking about?" I said, thrown by the sudden change of subject.

"I actually *lectured* Her Majesty."

"Oh, that..."

She meant today's (or was it yesterday's by now?) audience.

"Think she'll have my head cut off tomorrow?"

"No way. Petralka's not the type."

"Shinichi-kun, you're always so confident," she said with a chuckle. "It's almost like no one could know Petralka better than you."

"I don't— That's not—"

"I was just kidding."

"Sure... Sure."

I leaned against the wall next to her. The lights in the hall shone on her face in profile. I looked vacantly into the middle distance, just like she was doing, and asked, "What do you think we ought to do?"

"You mean about the empress?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you ask her to be a part of this anyway, Shinichi-kun?"

"I was just hoping I could make her feel better. Even a little bit..."

I had thought of her crying in her sleep, hidden where no one would see her, and I had wanted to lift just a small part of that burden. It had never occurred to me that Petralka might become obsessed with the very thing I was hoping would help her. With pretending to be someone else. Living a different life.

Yes, that could feel good, but—

"I agree, cosplaying is a lot of fun," Minori-san said. "It's a quick way to feel like you're somebody other than you are. To be honest, I enjoy that aspect of it. That's part of why I do it."

"I got that feeling somehow," I answered.

I didn't have any cosplay experience, but I had played online games, role-playing things where you took on the identity of a particular character. I thought the attraction was something similar. I enjoyed it even when the character was on a computer screen and the communicating was all done via in-game chat. How much more engaging would it be to put on a

costume?

"Yes, it's fun," Minori-san went on. "But I don't think we should use it as a way to escape."

I didn't say anything.

"Cosplay, anything designed to entertain us... In the end, it's all just fiction. A temporary way to forget about reality. Not a way to spend our lives running."

"To spend our lives running..."

"Yeah. If you're not careful, you can find your whole life consumed by it." There was something like conviction in her voice. "I can sure imagine how being an empress wouldn't be easy. But the fact is, she *is* an empress, and nothing else. Just like you can't really be anything but Kanou Shinichi, ultimately, nobody can be anyone but who they are."

I stood there, taking it all in.

"Suppose, just suppose, that she abdicated as empress. Would that let her keep pretending to be that magical girl forever?"

"No... Of course not."

If Petralka gave up her position, even the policies favoring otaku culture —and everything that had come from them—could well disappear. Even this mansion we were living in was really on loan to us from the empress.

"You're really... grown-up, Minori-san," I said.

There was something persuasive about the way she spoke. I felt like even if I had said the same words, they wouldn't have sounded the same way. Maybe it was because Minori-san seemed like she was backed up by life experience. This wasn't empty philosophy or an idea she'd gotten from someone else. She was talking about something she had lived through.

"I really don't think so," she said, her face falling. "I just... don't want Her Majesty to become like me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hmm," Minori-san said. "Do you really want to know?" She glanced at me.

"I—I mean, I don't want to pry or anything..." I shook my head.

By this point, even I had a vague sense of what was going on. I had noticed Minori-san forcefully changing the subject sometimes, and I could tell that whatever she was talking about now was somehow connected.

And yes, I wondered about it, but I wasn't going to interrogate her just

to satisfy my curiosity.

But then Minori-san went “Hmm” again, a pained smile coming over her face. Was it just me, or was there a hint of self-deprecation there?

“Sorry,” she said, “that was a loaded question. I want to tell you. Will you listen?”

“S-Sure.” When she put it that way, I had no reason to refuse.

Minori-san’s eyes half-closed, and she appeared to be looking at something far in the distance as she started talking. “I was— Well, I’m the child my parents finally managed to have after years and years of trying. But my mom died right after she gave birth to me. There’s some danger associated with having kids later in life, you know? So my family was just my dad and me. I didn’t have any siblings, obviously. In fact, I barely had any relatives at all. It was just me and Dad.”

Her smile grew a little deeper then. And, I thought, a little sadder.

“But my dad didn’t appreciate me much.”

It was such an offhanded way of saying it, I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “What? But... why?”

Her mother had given her life to produce this child, the child they had longed and hoped for for so many years. And aren’t fathers supposed to adore daughters? I knew my dad, for one, was a total softie when it came to my younger sister, Shizuki.

“Because I was a girl.” Minori-san shrugged.

“What...?”

“My dad... He wanted an heir.”

*An heir*? What was this, a samurai drama?

“Sounds old-fashioned, huh? But my dad was the head of a famous dojo, and he desperately wanted a son to be his successor. Don’t get me wrong, he was perfectly willing to raise me and everything, but it was... out of duty. Nothing more than that. Forget summer family vacations. He didn’t even come to school visit days.”

It would have been easy to say, “That’s awful!” But I didn’t actually know Minori-san’s dad, so I wasn’t really in a position to criticize him. And I didn’t get the feeling that Minori-san had told me about this hoping that I would badmouth him.

“He didn’t show his soft side very often. And he hardly ever drank. But when he was drunk, once in a while, I’d hear him muttering, ‘If only you’d

been a boy...' I don't think he ever remembered saying it, but when you're the person who has to hear it... Believe me, it's not something you forget."

"Yeah... I could see that."

"So I started training in hopes of impressing my father. I might never have a boy's body, but I thought I could become a man inside. Pretty dumb, huh?"

I was silent.

"It wasn't possible, of course. In fact, the irony was, as I went through middle school and high school, I started... growing up." She patted her chest with a distressingly dismissive motion. "Still, I refused to believe that all my work had been for nothing. I decided to go somewhere I could put my fighting skills to good use. Somewhere I could show that I was the equal of any man. And so I joined the Japan Self-Defense Force."

"That's..." I was lost for words. I felt like I should say something, but I didn't have the slightest idea what.

"But my dad died before I could earn his approval," Minori-san said flatly. There was no hint of tragedy in her voice, but that very lack of sadness made her words sound impossibly somber to me.

"It was like I had been possessed, and all of a sudden... I wasn't. I started to wonder what I was doing. I had always forced myself to avoid cute clothes and accessories and plush toys, all those girly things. I had refused to admit that I actually enjoyed them."

As if being interested in them was a bad thing.

"And all of a sudden... All that was meaningless. But it was way too late to just go back and be a 'normal' girl. I had been lying to myself for so long that I couldn't take it back."

We weren't talking about just a year or two here. Minori-san had probably been working on herself for a decade or more, ever since she could think for herself. "I should be more like a man." "I shouldn't be girlish." All that time she had been repeating those things, like the words of a curse. They had sunk in, become a part of her, and after that there was no getting them out.

The fact that she only cosplayed as guys must have been related to her desire to become a man. Maybe it accounted for the way she kept her hair in a bun, too: she wanted to let it grow, like a girl, but she had spent so long suppressing that sort of desire that she couldn't just let it hang down.

“In a way, the only girlish things about me are these boobs and the whole fujoshi thing...”

“That isn’t true!” I suddenly found myself shouting. Then, remembering that it was the middle of the night, I quickly brought my voice down. “That’s not true at all. If you aren’t girlish, Minori-san, then who in the world is?”

“Shinichi-kun?”

“I mean, I know I have a bad habit of looking at your chest—sorry about that. But that doesn’t mean other parts of you aren’t perfectly womanly. Absolutely not at all! Take that maid outfit from the other day—it looked great on you!”

“Hmmm...” Minori-san smiled, looking like she wasn’t quite sure about that.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand what she was trying to say. To her, the maid thing was itself basically cosplay. She might argue that because I was used to how she normally looked, the difference made her look more womanly than she would have otherwise. “Gap moe,” if you will. Again, I understood the logic.

But still...

“I’m the older child in my family,” I said. “And I’ve always, always wanted an older sister.”

“Say what...?” The sudden change of topic left Minori-san scratching her head.

But I pushed ahead. “With a little sister around, it’s always, ‘You’re her big brother. You have to set a good example.’ That sort of thing. Since the little sister was born after you, everything is harder with her, and you’re kind of... pushed to the side.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So I always wanted, you know, an older sister who would look out for me and be nice to me and everything.”

“I don’t think that’s physically possible.”

“Obviously, but... Little kids don’t understand how these things work, right? So I went to my parents and begged them for an older sister. But they didn’t quite understand.”

I mean, what kind of parents say to a kid, “Ahh. So you’re moe for older sisters, huh?” But mine did.

“.....You’ve had kind of a weird life yourself, it sounds like.”

Well, considering their occupations...

“But anyway, that appreciation for older sisters has always been there inside me. So I’ve always had a certain reaction to the term ‘older-sister moe.’”

To be fair, I *was* moe for older sisters, or least, I ended up that way.

“The point I’m making is, Minori-san, you rank awfully high in the annals of older-sister-ish characters!”

“Sigh... Wait, who’s a character?”

“There’s a lot of variation in older-sister-type characters these days, but the primary characteristic is definitely motherliness. This capacity they have for healing by virtue of being older. Yeah, there are violent older sister-types and cool ones and whatever, but there’s no intrinsic connection between those qualities and being an older sister-type. From that perspective Minori-san, I think you’re perfect!” I clenched my fist, which always makes an argument more convincing. “And on top of that, you actually turn out to be really strong in a fight?! The type who can protect a person when the moment comes?! The type who jumps out in front with a ‘You won’t die—I’m here to protect you, after all!’?!”

“Er, I mean, I *am* your bodyguard...”

“The point is, you’re great! You’re fine! I know older sister characters—you can trust me!”

“But you like all *sorts* of characters.”

“Of course I do. I’m pretty much game for anything but little-sister moe and cross-dressers. But so what?”

Minori-san didn’t answer; there was an instant of silence.

The next second, both of us started laughing—and then, once again remembering the time, quickly shut ourselves up.

“Hah! Now I get it. Now I see why Myusel and Elvia and Her Highness are all so into you.”

“Sorry? What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? You’re a total lady-killer, Shinichi-kun!”

Seriously, I didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Ahem. Not to brag,” I said, “but you’re talking to the home security guard who got shot down by his very own girl-next-door when he confessed

his feelings for her.”

“That’s really *not* to brag.”

“Otakuism 101: self-flagellation.”

“Hehe.....” Minori-san smiled gently. Then she said, “Thanks, Shinichi-kun. I feel better.”

The next morning.

Before I went to school, I went to Eldant Castle. I had Minori-san and Myusel wait outside. Normally they would come into the audience chamber with me, but I had my reasons for wanting to go in alone today.

I had to persuade Petralka.

Rather than having a bunch of people around who might all jump in, I thought it might be easier for her to accept what I had to say if she only had to talk to me.

“Well then, Shinichi—what did you want?” Petralka asked from her usual spot on the throne.

In fact, everything was as it usually was. She was leaning on the armrests, her chin on her hand. She used the same important tone she always did. (To be fair, she *was* important.) But today, she lacked a certain... energy. There was no strength in her expression. She almost seemed downright tired.

“I’ve come today with a request for Your Majesty and Minister Cordobal,” I said. My carefully polite diction caused Petralka and Garius both to raise an eyebrow at me. No doubt they realized I was trying to sound especially respectful as I told them my wish.

“And what is that?”

“To continue shooting.” Petralka’s face tightened a little at that. I had expected that, so I ignored her and went on: “I ask your permission to resume filming.”

“Meaning... without us?” Petralka asked in a strained voice.

I shook my head. “Not at all. I respectfully request Your Majesty’s participation.”

Petralka didn’t say anything, but her expression brightened immediately.

Garius, predictably, looked much less pleased.

"Shinichi. I'm sure you recall our conversation yesterday," he said. "That would be most difficult for us."

"About that," I said, turning toward him. "I'm concerned that if we quit filming now, we're going to be left with a sense of dissatisfaction. Me, Her Majesty—all of us. When I think about the shoot, I really want to be sure we can look back on it without regret."

"But didn't you say you could finish the work without Her Majesty?"

"The making-of material, yes," I said. "But I'm not talking about that now. I'm thinking about finishing the complete movie. I want to go all the way to the end with this effort, please. And for that, we absolutely need our lead actress—we need Petralka."

"Mere self-indulgence," Garius sniffed. "There are already enough problems on account of this activity. Extending beyond the original schedule is out of the question."

*Er, well, technically, he's absolutely right. But...*

"It's true, I want to extend. But I've got some ground rules in mind."

"Hm?" Garius gave me a dubious look.

"Obviously, for Her Majesty to neglect her duties as Empress isn't good for her or for us. Even I know that. So what I'd like to do is limit the amount of shooting we do at any one time, but slightly extend the overall schedule."

It wasn't exactly "one hour of video games per day!" But it should make the filming less likely to have an adverse impact on Petralka's political duties.

That was my solution—a sort of compromise.

"However," I said, taking a deep breath, "when this movie is done, it'll be over for real."

"What do you mean, over?" Petralka asked with a vacant expression.

"When we're done filming this, we won't do any more. Ever."

At the moment, we were the only film concern going in the entire Eldant Empire. If we stopped, and decided not to do more, then by definition there would never be another movie.

"Shinichi!" Petralka shouted, jumping up from her throne. "You rat...!"

She probably felt I had betrayed her.

Heck, there was no *probably* about it.

She was about to take a run at me, but Garius grabbed her shoulder.

"Why?!" she said. "Why would you—"

"Every work has to end sometime, Petralka," I said. "Otherwise, it can never be complete."

"B-But... Well, then, what about— you know! A 'sequel'? A continuation?"

I shook my head. "Remember, movies are fiction. You can't just keep doing them forever because you enjoy it. Then they wouldn't be entertainment anymore. Just a vehicle for the creators to indulge themselves, or to escape reality. And maybe that'd be okay, if you could really throw yourself into them... But Petralka, do you really want to abdicate as Empress and just make movies forever? Do you really think that would make you happy?"

Petralka was lost for words.

She was a smart kid, so I suspected she understood. What I was saying wasn't that different from what Minori-san had said the day before. I couldn't imagine Petralka hadn't spent some time thinking about it.

"It's exactly because there's a real you that becoming a fictional you is so much fun, Petralka," I added.

"B-But..."

"Forgive my bluntness," Garius said with a frown, "but even if Her Majesty agrees, what makes you think that I will?"

"I've got an offer that might make it easier for you," I said. "A trade, if you will."

"Oh?"

"That dragon you mentioned. How about you let the JSDF take care of it?"

".....I'm sorry?"

Even Garius was surprised by this.

"The JSDF is in no way part of the Eldant army, and won't have any effect on its organization or operations. I know dragon-slaying is considered a matter of public security, but it wouldn't upset anything that much, would it?"

Garius paused in thought.

That's right: this very morning, I had asked Minori-san to get in touch with Matoba-san, and forced him to tell me posthaste whether or not such a

thing would be possible.

Matoba-san and the whole Japanese government had been gunning to essentially become the Eldant empire's "police force" since the beginning. If they could do that, they might effectively be able to turn the Eldant Empire into their colony.

The Eldant government, however, was nobody's fool, and had turned down the Japanese offer to handle local security.

So what if this were to be considered "natural-disaster relief"? That sort of thing was the JSDF's bread and butter, and getting rid of giant monsters was basically tradition (?) for them. A one-off dragon-slaying mission would be limited in scope and duration. But because it might also provide a precedent for being involved in the Eldant Empire's domestic affairs, and might indeed create a feeling of indebtedness on their part, it was diplomatically attractive to the Japanese government.

And anyway, the whole film-shoot thing had begun as a way of covering for a screwup on the part of the Japanese and the JSDF.

"I admit it's an intriguing offer," Garius said. "But can your Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff really handle a dragon?"

"They should be okay, I think," I said.

I had spoken to Myusel about it, and she said that the real reason dragons were so much more feared than things like wyverns wasn't just because they were bigger or more violent.

It was because, apparently, magic had almost no effect on them.

Dragons were already what you might call quasi-divine, or at least quasi-mythical, creatures, and they could basically shrug off direct magical attacks.

Consider it from the perspective of biology as we know it: anything that was that big, and could fly in the sky, and even breathe fire—we had to assume it operated on different principles from the average life-form. It seemed to metabolize something magical or spiritual or whatever in order to keep that huge body together. Dragons (I hope you're sitting down for this) had the innate ability to absorb any magic that was thrown at them.

When you got close to a dragon, therefore, magical effects stopped working. Short version: if you wanted to bring one of them down, you had to do it without spells. You would have to whittle down your opponent's health with swords and spears and bows or whatever else. Because a dragon

was a moving target, catapults would obviously be useless, and a light bow could hardly shoot one scale off a creature like that. You would need a crossbow or something to have any hope of injuring it—but then your rate of fire would be abysmal.

The upshot was that knights with swords and spears had to get in close to fight the creature, which meant an endless stream of casualties.

But what about the JSDF?

The military's modern weapons had nothing to do with magic, so they should work like normal even on a dragon. And a small-caliber machine gun could shoot quickly and with more stopping power than a bow—remember, it was the ability of firearms to punch through plate mail that put an end to Middle Ages-style armor—so they might be able to keep working the dragon's health down while keeping their distance. If they could bring anti-tank missiles to bear, that might be even better.

"Obviously, there are some things we won't know until we actually try them, but that's true of anything," I said.

Garius mulled over my suggestion for a long moment. Finally, he nodded and said, "Very well. If you can take care of even one of the problems we're having, so much the better for us. We can't give final approval until Prime Minister Zahar and the other ministers have agreed, but I suspect this can be done."

"Thank you very much."

"I will, of course, hold you to your word regarding your fil-ming."

"Of course."

He meant my promise to film in short bursts, and then to stop when we were done with the movie.

Finally—

"Petralka." I looked at the adorable empress. She was biting her lip and looking at the floor. She didn't so much as twitch, even when I said her name.

Maybe she hated me now.

But then...

"Tomorrow..." Petralka said in a whisper. "We will be there... at the usual time. Make sure you're ready for us."

"I will. Thanks."

It still wasn't completely clear whether she would go along with this, but

at least she would work on the shoot with us. I let out a sigh of relief.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get to school now."

I gave a bow, then turned away from the two of them.

I thought at least one of them might have some parting shot for me, but neither Petralka nor Garius said anything as I left the room, heading outside to where the two women were waiting for me.

# Chapter Four: No Business Like...

The month or so after that was... turbulent, to say the least.

Up until that point, we really just had to gin up something that looked more or less plausible, so things had been pretty relaxed. But if we were going to create an entire movie, there were a lot of details that suddenly had to be changed, including filming a bunch of scenes with the JSDF that we hadn't originally expected to need. I constantly had to be in about five places at once.

When school was over, there would be a whirlwind of preparations for shooting. Sometimes we would even use our little break periods to get ready.

Even our once-slapdash dragon model suddenly got built out to something that was hard to tell apart from the real thing, ready for any scene where it might be needed. Profuse thanks to the dwarf parents who helped out with that.

We would rehearse repeatedly ahead of time so that when Petralka arrived, we wouldn't waste a moment of filming time. Our work schedules were detailed practically down to the minute. It was like being a pop idol or something.

But finally...

"All right—cut!" Minori-san called. "That's it! All our scenes are done shooting!"

I gave a silent cheer when I heard that. Others were cheering, too, and not silently. Everyone there, everyone involved with the film, was punching the air or raising their hands or doing a little jig, shouting and hurrah-ing. It wasn't just the students, either—the adults who had pitched in to help, the knights who came along as Petralka's bodyguards, and the JSDF staff present were all part of it.

The first thing I felt was tremendous relief. Given how packed our schedule had been, that only made sense. Now, at last, our movie shoot was well and truly over. It had been a blast, but now it was done.

“Just gotta check the take,” Minori-san said, calling up some recordings on her computer screen. I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye, but then I sat down right there on set, still in my student uniform costume—and just about fell asleep. The hilltop was covered in neat blades of grass that were really very pleasant to lie in.

I was so tired. And yet, inside, I felt a swirl of emotion. Was this what they called a sense of accomplishment?

Of course, there was still plenty of work to do. Editing, music, and sound effects, for example.

Lying there, looking up at the twilight sky, a shadow suddenly floated over me. Trying to move as little as I had to, I turned my head to look up.

“Excellent work, Master.”

Myusel was standing beside me, also still in her filming uniform. For a second, I was fixated on her bare legs, which were visible under the hem of her skirt.

“Master?” Her suspicious voice brought me back to myself, and I quickly tore my attention away from her legs, making myself smile at her. Privately, I was wishing we had designed the skirts to be just a tiny bit shorter, but for the time being that would be my secret.

“You did great too, Myusel. You’re not tired?”

“No, I’m all right. I think you must be far more fatigued than me.”

“You know, oddly enough, it’s not as bad as all that.” The work had been pretty neatly divided, after all. “More importantly...”

I turned my head and scanned for one particular person, whom I soon found.

Petralka an Eldant III stood there, surrounded by students and their parents and looking somewhat uncomfortable. Whatever else she may have been, she was very much the star of our production. Partly, of course, people just wanted to get close to the empress, but she would have been the center of attention even without her royal rank.

She alone, among the entire joyous crowd, was wearing a gloomy expression. Maybe she still couldn’t quite accept that it was all over. So I hadn’t been able to get through to her, in the end...

That’s what I was thinking when a shout came from the distance.

“Your Majesty!”

I turned to discover a mounted knight riding straight for us. For a

moment, I thought he had come to retrieve Petralka now that the filming was over, but no.

"You must run!" he shouted, the forest at his back.

For a second, we didn't understand what he meant.

Run? From what? Why the rush?

"Hrm?" Petralka said, looking equally perplexed. "What are you—*huh*?"

The sound of total amazement was entirely understandable.

Because a dragon had suddenly emerged from the woods.

"Huh? Wha? What?"

A massive red form was coming our way. There was an instant where I actually wondered how our model was moving without the wyverns. But that was stupid. The obvious weight behind every footstep made it clear that this was the real thing. This wasn't some clever mock-up. It was a flesh-and-blood monster.

"Is that...?" It had to be the one Garius had mentioned. The dragon people had been reporting in the vicinity of the capital. "And what in the world...?"

Right in the middle of its forehead was something that looked like a horn. But no—it would make sense to have a horn there, but this was clearly something man-made. It looked like a spike or a nail of some kind. It certainly hadn't sprouted there by itself. It looked like something had pounded it in.

*Wait... How is it even still alive with that thing in its head?!*

It sure looked like the spike should have been piercing the dragon's brain.

"Run! Run! Ruuuuunnnn!" the knights and JSDF soldiers shouted to the students and parents, pulling out their weapons.

But it was too late.

*Roooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrr!*

The dragon bellowed.

The air shook, and believe it or not, several flashes that looked a lot like lightning lanced through the sky. I found out later that this was apparently caused by elemental sprites startled by the monster; they flash when frightened, the way humans scream.

Several of the students stood rooted to the spot, unable to run away. I could definitely sympathize. Feeling overwhelmed when confronted with something like this was a perfectly natural reaction.

As for me, I didn't fall to the ground or anything, but my knees were shaking so hard that I couldn't move.

"Run awaaghh!"

One flap of the giant wings sent both the knights and the JSDF soldiers tumbling.

This was not good. I was sure that if the JSDF had been able to meet the dragon in formation and with their weapons at the ready, they wouldn't have had any trouble with it, but when it just showed up like this, they were totally on the back foot.

The dragon simply knocked our bodyguards out of the way. It glided overhead for several dozen meters at low altitude, lazily taking in those of us who stood there frozen with fear. Then, fangs bared, it launched an attack in our direction—

—straight at the *other* dragon.

That is to say, at the model we had been using.

We looked on agog as the dragon, practically ignoring us, tore into the wireframe model, biting and slashing at it.

Wait... This couldn't mean...

Had this dragon really taken our model for a rival? And was it here to

fight over territory?!

If so, our dwarves with their fearsome creative powers had my immense gratitude.

But then...

“The cameras!”

The scream came from one of the elf students I had brought along to help with filming—it was Loek. He was already flinging himself forward, toward the spot where three film cameras stood near the model.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

“Look out, it’s dangerous!” This came from another student—Romilda the dwarf girl, who together with her classmates immediately set about intoning some magic spell. Maybe it was the sort of earthworks magic I had seen during the soccer game. They must have been planning to attack the dragon with it.

But then someone shouted, “It’s not working! Get away!”

And it was true: they must have finished their spell, because the earth around the dragon was bubbling up. But that was all. No protective walls or sharp rocks came bursting from the ground. The dragon simply absorbed all the magic before it could have any real effect.

So magic really didn’t work on dragons.

Only physical attacks could—wait. Physical attacks?

“Loek!”

The dragon had torn the model to shreds before it finally seemed to realize its opponent was a fake. It was enough to make you wish dragons were just a little smarter, but then, that spike in its head probably wasn’t doing it any favors.

But that was neither here nor there.

The dragon seemed to have found a new enemy: the elf boy running higgledy-piggledy nearby, trying with great effort to collect the oversized cameras.

This was bad.

“What was it? Umm, uhhh, how did it go? Darn! Uhhh, umm...!”

I couldn’t get my feet to move, but at least my mouth hadn’t stopped working. And so...

“*Ia redoro imu shigamu reuobu dona euruto uoi deifurisu ekamu toshifu dona ekirutsu taato imena!*” By the magic power and true words within me,

I command you, sprites of wind, form a fist to smite my enemy!

Awesome! I was able to remember the whole thing!

The next instant, a gust of air went shooting in the direction my palm was pointing.

That is to say, not toward the dragon, but toward Loek and his cameras, which were about to be caught up in the dragon's claws.

Magic didn't work on dragons, but physical attacks did. So if you could use magic on something nearby that would then effectively become a simple physical weapon, presumably the magic would work and not be absorbed. So I hoped, anyway. And it looked like I was right.

Loek, still clutching the cameras, went flying sideways. The dragon's claws raked the empty air where he had been standing seconds earlier.

Holy crap, will you look at that?! Will you look at *me*?! Way to go, me! I was actually able to remember the magic spell Myusel taught me right when I actually needed it! I really did have the genuine, actual ability to use magic!

And also, I'm sorry, Loek! I think being hit by a magical wind gust probably, maybe, I hope hurts less than being mauled by a dragon! And those cameras are probably toast! Also—crap! It was supposed to be a secret even from Petralka that I can use magic! Aww, but what else was I gonna do?

These and other very excited thoughts ran through my head, but then the dragon set off after Loek.

*Bad! Very bad!* I had been able to put him out of the immediate danger of the monster's claws, but that was all. We had to do something about the dragon itself, or it was going to wipe everyone here.

The knights and soldiers finally managed to pull themselves to their feet, groaning, but they were too late. The soldiers who had accompanied us to help with filming had their Type 89s and their 9mms, but they hadn't brought any large-caliber weapons. We were facing down a creature that was as big as a pile of grizzly bears, with the pain tolerance of a reptile—small arms were hardly likely to do any damage it would notice.

Not to mention, with Loek standing right there, the chances of accidental friendly fire would prevent any serious barrage.

"Loek!" somebody shouted.

It was no use.

Loek was going to be... eaten!

There was nothing else to do but start chanting again. Myusel and the other elves joined me, not with any hope of bringing down the dragon, but just of buying enough time to protect Loek.

“Wha...?”

That was when I saw Minori-san, and at first I thought she had lost her mind with fear.

She was charging straight at the dragon—head-on.

And she didn’t have a weapon.

Well, maybe she had her pistol or something, but she hadn’t drawn it.

What in the world was she thinking?!

She swept up Loek, who hadn’t been able to get up off the ground (my fault! Sorry!), but by that point the dragon’s jaws were practically on top of her.

“Minori-san?!”

Even as I shouted, she spun around. She managed to do it even though she was carrying Loek—in fact, she used him as a sort of counterweight to add to her momentum. Was she trying to turn on her heel and run?

As a matter of fact, no.

Minori-san rose up on her pivot leg, aiming a spinning reverse roundhouse kick at the dragon’s head—or more specifically, at the thing sticking out of it.

*Roooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrr!*

The dragon howled again and tumbled back. Minori-san’s attack seemed to have worked. The creature flapped its wings violently and waved its tail, flinging its limbs every which way. But it could no longer focus well enough to target Loek and Minori-san.

“Light it up!”

As soon as they were sure Loek and Minori-san were clear of the field of fire, the JSDF soldiers started shooting.

“Concentrate fire! Aim for its joints!” someone among the soldiers shouted.

That made sense to me. However thick its scales might be, for the purposes of mobility, its joints would have to be less heavily armored. It

was the exact same strategy you would use against a giant robot. Why not a dragon?

The creature couldn't hold its ground, and crumbled. The soldiers had focused their fire on the joint of its left leg from behind, and it could no longer stand.

Its massive wings spread open.

"It's making a break for it!"

"No! Don't let it get airborne!"

The soldiers' shouting didn't stop the dragon from lofting itself into the air, gusts eddying around it. Then, it opened its jaws and looked right at us...

"Fire breath?!"

A light began to shine in its open mouth. It looked less like a flamethrower and more like a beam cannon. The beam probably came from agitated fire sprites, magical energy the dragon had forcibly absorbed from the air around it. So dragons didn't actually spew fire as such. They used magic, too, although differently from humans. Maybe the reason they had to be flying in order to use their fire breath was to avoid getting caught up in the conflagration themselves, or to prevent suffocation from lack of oxygen.

"Fire! I mean shoot! Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

The JSDF kept up the assault, but the glow in the dragon's mouth was getting bright enough to hurt the eyes.

Then there was a roar of steel and flame.

The dragon was thrown off-balance, falling pathetically to the ground. On its back were a number of gunshot wounds, inflicted by something vastly larger than the 5.56mm bullets of a Type 89. Something powerful enough to gouge out parts of the dragon's flesh.

"Yeah!" The knights let up a cheer.

We spotted two Light Armored Vehicles coming up behind the monster. They carried heavy cannons lobbing half-inch rounds—Browning M2s, popularly known as .50-cal machine guns. Unlike the Type 89, these weapons were developed to combat LAVs and aircraft. One shot would be enough to blow away a human being. A single round carried more than ten times the energy of a Type 89 bullet. Serious stuff.

Even a dragon couldn't resist too many hits from—

"Watch out! Get out of there—no, get down!" someone shouted.

A glance at the dragon's open jaws showed that the fire sprites there had begun to pulse.

*No way. Was it gonna—*

"Master!"

"Shinichi-sama!"

Myusel and Elvia dragged me to the ground.

The next instant, there was a huge noise, and the dragon's head exploded like a balloon.

Maybe it was all those fire sprites going off at once when the creature lost control of them. Fried dragon bits splattered to the ground around us, and what was left of the body slumped to the ground.

"Ee-yikes!"

It was then that, with a deafening and very dangerous-sounding *ka-wumph!*, something like a massive steel spike landed in front of me.

Wait. I knew what this was. It was that thing that had been stuck in the dragon's forehead.

The surface was covered in strange characters of some kind. I had seen similar markings somewhere else—on the magic rings we wore on our fingers.

Meaning this had to be...

"Are you okay?!" Soldiers jumped out of the LAV and came running over. Apparently they were from the unit that had been assigned to dragon extermination duties. Unlike the soldiers who were helping with the film shoot, they were wearing full armor and equipment. Most likely, they had been in pursuit of the monster and had followed it here.

"Thanks, I... I think...?" I said vacantly.

"Your Majesty, are you unharmed?!" The knights ran over to Petralka, their faces pale.

The next day, we found ourselves even busier than we had been when filming.

First of all, we were called to Eldant Castle, where we were peppered with questions. They wanted to know all about the dragon that had attacked

our set. How had it moved? How had it flown? What had it looked like when preparing to breathe fire? And so on and so forth.

As I might have guessed from the spike in its head, this was more than just a rampaging animal that had stumbled into a human-inhabited area.

“That dragon,” Garius announced to me, Petralka, and the audience chamber, “was most likely a ‘puppet drake’ from the Kingdom of Bahairam.”

“Puppet drake?”

“We had heard rumors, but no one believed they actually existed,” Garius said with a frown. “The notion has been around for quite a long time—but no one believed it was actually feasible to use magic to turn a dragon into a sort of slave.”

Given how hard it was just to kill one of the things, it had to be just about impossible to capture one alive and position a magical instrument—that spike—in a very specific spot on its head.

The stories was, that monster was a secret weapon of an enemy nation, of a type spoken of essentially only in legends—and for some reason, it was deep inside Eldant territory.

“One possibility is that those Bahairamanian soldiers who kept violating our territory were actually looking for that creature.”

“Oh yeah... There was some kind of issue with incursions, wasn’t there?” I asked. Who knew that those two things might turn out to be connected?

Whatever the case, if Bahairam had figured out how to not only capture a dragon but turn it into a puppet wyrm, that implied they could have serious firepower on their side. This obviously meant it was possible to create such a creature, and the Holy Eldant Empire would be eager to investigate the possibility and develop similar technology. Unfortunately, the dragon’s last act had been to self-destruct, taking its all-important head with it. The magical tool involved was heavily damaged. The Eldant administration was left to gather what information it could by questioning eyewitnesses to the event.

“In any event,” Garius said, bringing things to a close after having thoroughly interrogated me and Minori-san, “it is a fact that the Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff defeated a dragon. For that, I thank them.” His eyes locked on Minori-san.

She didn’t say anything, but just smiled a quiet smile and gave one perfect bow.

We were in a bird-drawn carriage on our way to school after leaving Eldant Castle. Minori-san and I were sitting across from each other.

I had sent Myusel ahead to the school, so she wasn’t there. It was just us and the driver, and we were the only ones in the passenger compartment.

“Hey,” I said, grabbing hold of a passing thought. “Minori-san, you were really awesome.”

“Huh? What?” She blinked, obviously surprised. She didn’t seem to quite register what I was saying

“I mean... You went and just straight-up *kicked a dragon* in the head. Out of nowhere!”

“Oh. Well, you know.” She smiled shyly. Coming from an older woman, this was cute enough to be against the rules. “My body just kind of moved on its own. If I’d thought about it, I’m sure I would have realized it was insane.”

“If you hadn’t done it, Loek would be dead for sure.”

Plus, her kicking that spike seemed like it had really turned the tide that day. The fact that a single human had gone toe-to-toe with a dragon—even just for a second—and actually hurt it... It seemed to shake everyone else there out of their terrified stupor.

“Is that, uh, something else you learned from your dad?”

The move she had used hadn’t looked like a typical military tactic to me—more like something out of kenpou or the like. Not that I was an especially experienced observer of the martial arts. It was just a general impression.

“Yeah. I guess so, yeah. I had hand-to-hand combat training after I entered the JSDF, but my dad’s stuff was there first.” She shrugged. “Honestly, the move never went off so smoothly before.” Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, “I wonder... If my dad had seen that, would he finally have accepted me? Would he have admitted that I might be a daughter, but I’m as good as any son?”

“I don’t think that’s the point,” I said, trying to sound extra exasperated. “You were fighting a *dragon*, for crying out loud. A creature we would have considered the last boss from some fantasy game until just a little while ago. And you were carrying Loek, no less. And you still landed a blow that would have finished off any human opponent at all.”

“Maybe...” Minori-san said after a moment, and sort of half-smiled. A hint of the smile made its way into her voice, too. Maybe just a little bit of the burden that had been weighing her down for so long had been relieved. At least, I hoped so.

“Okay, then,” I said as the carriage came to a stop.

Minori-san and I got out and turned toward the school.

“Huh...?”

There at the front entranceway of the building stood a single student.

“Loek?”

It was the elf boy whom Minori-san had saved the day before. His face was red as he rushed up to us, like he was excited about something. He had obviously been waiting there for us to show up. Wait a second. I was sure first period should have started by now. Was he cutting?

“Minori Koganuma-sensei!”

Loek stood at attention in front of Minori-san, looking pretty much as if I didn’t even exist.

“Er... Yes? What’s going on?” Even Minori-san looked a little taken aback at this.

Blushing harder and harder by the second, Loek said, “Thank you very much for what you did yesterday!”

“Oh... Yeah. Sure. I’m glad neither of us was hurt,” she said with a smile.

Then Loek leaned backward awkwardly, looking up at the sky. He was shaking a little, as if trying to hold something in. Finally, he managed to make his eyes meet Minori-san’s again, and exclaimed, “Also!”

“Yes?”

“W-W-W-W-W-W-W-Will you marry me?!”

Minori-san and I were completely silent for a moment.

*...Wait, what the heck does he think he’s asking, out of the blue like that?!*

“Th-This is very sudden,” Minori-san said, the half-smile still on her

face. “I have to admit, I can’t imagine why you’d want to—”

But Loek continued very seriously, “When you held me in your arms, Minori-sensei, I saw it. I saw your face in profile, strong and beautiful, like a Valkyrie, and I fell completely...!”

A single, thin trail of blood dribbled from one of his nostrils.

Was this—you know? The “rope-bridge effect”? Misattribution of arousal? Where you’re in some really dangerous situation and you happen to look at a member of the opposite sex, and you think it’s love that’s making your pulse race?

Or maybe—just maybe—Loek had really and truly fallen in love with Minori-san as she fought to save him.

“I—”

Loek took a step forward, about to go on, when we heard a dull sound of something colliding with the back of his head.

“Gnnrrrr! Hey!”

He squatted down, clutching his head. The person who had grabbed his collar turned out to be the dwarf girl, Romilda.

Ahhh. Dwarves were reputed to be strong. I’ll bet it wouldn’t be much fun to be hit by one.

“It’s bad enough for you to just skip out on classes, but to do it so you could stand here and say something so *stupid*—!”

“You dumb dwarf! Tactless tunnel-dweller! Let me go! Unhand me! I—I will—!”

Romilda dragged Loek kicking and screaming into the school building and out of sight.

“See?” I said.

“See? See what?” Minori-san replied, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

“I think you really can have them both. Strong, manly Minori-san and attractive, feminine Minori-san can coexist.”

“Hmmmmm,” Minori-san muttered, as if she wasn’t quite sure whether to be happy about that. “Well... I guess you’re right. Maybe.”

Then she smiled.

Moving on to the day *after* that one.

I was in the living area of my mansion, talking to Matoba-san. We were both seated on sofas, a table between us. Sitting on top of the table was a tiny memory card.

"The video is on here," I said.

"You're quite a help." Matoba-san picked up the memory card in one hand, and with the other he produced a thin metal container, about the size of a cigarette case, from his bag. It must have been some kind of carrier for important data. He put the memory card inside it, then gave a long, slow nod.

"I'm relieved to have this in my possession."

"Do you think you'll be able to throw people off with this?"

"We're already seeing a gradual effect," he said, smiling.

Final shooting had only concluded the day before last, but Minori-san had been giving rough cuts to Matoba-san at intervals, and they had been leaked onto the net. Just as I had predicted, after several of the clips came out, people started saying things like, "It's just some stealth marketing for some movie!" and "Does this even look real?"

If we then released a trailer—essentially confirming everyone's suspicions—most of the world would politely go along with our little ruse.

"Out of curiosity," Matoba-san said suddenly, "what do you plan to do with the other one?"

"What other one?"

"Not our making-of tape, but the complete film you've been shooting here." He had a dry smile on his face.

The truth was, I hadn't told Matoba-san about that part of the project. Maybe he had heard about it from one of the JSDF soldiers working on the shoot or something. This might just have been his way of letting me know that he knew, or perhaps he was warning me not to take him and his cohort too lightly.

Whatever the case, I replied, "I just kind of figured all of us here could watch it together."

We had never planned to make this movie. For the most part we had done it just to indulge ourselves, because it happened to line up with what interested us. I figured we were the only ones who would enjoy watching it at all. I didn't have any grand plans for the film, but after all the work we

had put into it, the least we could do was get everyone together to watch it.

"I don't really know when that will be yet, though..."

"I see." nodded Matoba-san. I thought I saw the ghost of a smile play over his lips, but maybe I was just imagining it. "I'm rather impressed," he went on.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Matoba-san's narrow eyes got even narrower, and the corners of his mouth rose slightly. "You took a bunch of people who had never even heard of movies, let alone otaku culture, and successfully completed an entire film shoot with them. That takes a certain gumption. It's not something just anyone could accomplish."

"Thank you," I said after a moment. Given everything that had gone before, I had trouble enjoying Matoba-san's accolades.

"I believe I'll excuse myself now," he said.

"Oh, sure."

Following Matoba-san's lead, I stood from my sofa, accompanying him to the door and watching him go.

The courtyard of Eldant Castle was crowded to overflowing.

Evening was advancing past twilight, the golden light of the setting sun giving way to the rich indigo of an ever-darkening sky. On a normal day, this was about the time we would be getting together in the mansion's dining area to enjoy whatever Myusel had cooked for us that night.

So why were we here? Easy: we had been summoned.

It was, of course, Petralka who had issued the call. Those requested to appear included myself and Minori-san, Myusel, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise —effectively, everyone who lived at my mansion.

What was more, when we arrived at the designated courtyard, we found Loek and Romilda, Eduardo, and all their parents, along with a unit of knights, another group from the JSDF, and also several lizardmen.

What an eclectic group.

Everyone else seemed to be having the same thought; they were all glancing at one another, unable to hide their perplexity. Well, okay, the

lizardmen's feelings were pretty well hidden from me, but still.

"What's going on here...?" I wondered aloud.

What could be the point of bringing so many people together here so suddenly?

The presence of the students and the Japanese military suggested this had something to do with the movie shoot, but then why were the lizardmen involved? It seems like this was probably the first time they had even set foot on the castle grounds. Brooke informed me that they all appeared rather intimidated and more than a little confused. Lizardmen may be brave enough to face down a huge enemy without flinching, but an unfamiliar situation could still throw them off.

As I was ruminating on this, a knight shouted, "Announcing Her Majesty, ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire, Petralka an Eldant the Third! All present, attend!"

The courtyard, which had been buzzing with voices, immediately fell silent.

I looked to a gallery abutting the courtyard to see Petralka, accompanied by Garius, Zahar, and several knights, making her way slowly toward us. She advanced among people who stood with their heads bowed in submission, and mounted a podium that had been set up specially for this occasion. Then she produced a microphone from somewhere and said, "Our summons was somewhat abrupt. We thank you for responding."

The way she spoke was so easy and natural—and yet it carried all the solemnity proper to an empress. I was reminded once again that the girl before me stood at the pinnacle of this nation's power structure. If any normal girl her age had been dropped into a situation like this and told to give a speech, she would probably have frozen—or perhaps have come across as too agitated for the moment. Petralka, however, sounded perfectly composed.

"The smooth—or at least relatively problem-free—course of filming was thanks to all of your help. For this, we also extend our gratitude."

A murmur started up again amongst the crowd. It was exceedingly rare for the empress to repeatedly offer her subjects her thanks like this.

"And now, in celebration of the successful completion of the Holy Eldant Empire's first 'moo-vee,'" Petralka said somberly, "we wish to hold a 'view-wing par-tee.'"

“.....What?” I said, caught totally off guard by this announcement.

But even as I and most of the other people in the courtyard tried to figure out what was what, a huge white sheet was lowered along one wall of the courtyard, like a projector screen. As far as I could tell, some of the castle maids on the terrace above were unrolling it.

The sheet had to be at least three meters tall and five meters wide. That ratio rang a faint bell with me. 16:9. The familiar dimensions of a high-definition broadcast or movie screen.

Meaning... Wait, really?!

As we stood there in shock, the maids wheeled out a projector on a cart and started setting it up.

“Let it be said,” Petralka added with a glance at the video equipment, “this is also being played simultaneously in several locations around town.”

“Say whaaaaat?!” I exclaimed in absolute, earnest amazement.

Where had Petralka even learned the expression “viewing party”? And the screen was one thing, but where had she gotten a projector? And the electricity to run it?

“...Hold on a second.”

It was at that point that it dawned on me: only someone connected to the Japanese government could have made this happen. But if the editing wasn’t finished, there wouldn’t have been anything to view at a viewing party. And that all added up to one thing...

“Minori-san?!”

“...Heh heh,” the WAC said, flashing me a “peace” sign and sounding more than a little pleased with herself.

“But why...?”

“Oh, you know... Don’t you want everyone to see it right away, before all the excitement cools down? I pulled an all-nighter to do the editing.”

“Y-Yeah, I figured. But what about this projection equipment?”

“Oh, I asked Matoba-san to handle it.”

“.....Oh.”

Now that I thought about it, Matoba-san had given me that wry smile when I mentioned the idea of a viewing party, which would mean that he already knew about Minori-san’s scheme (?) at the time. I don’t know whether he was specifically looking to surprise me or not, but that would sure teach me for not taking him seriously!

Finally, there was a collective gasp from the crowd. An image appeared on the sheet—I mean, the screen. Matoba-san had even gotten them speakers, because I heard sounds—heck, even *music*.

The first thing that showed up on-screen was the dragon. Not the real one defeated by the JSDF, of course, but our dwarf-made model. Dark clouds gathered in the sky behind it as it rose haltingly into the air, drawn up on wires.

Then the scene changed. Now we were on an idyllic hilltop. Zoom in to reveal a young man running desperately through the field.

Wait—that was *me*!

"Hrrgh," I grunted involuntarily. It was not a pretty sound.

Yes, I'd known this was coming. I'd read the script and I knew that I appeared early on. But knowing it was one thing. Actually seeing it up there on-screen...?

*What a weird way of running. I'm running really weird, aren't I?!*

*And I know I'm supposed to look desperate, but do I look* too *desperate? I'm overacting, aren't I?!*

I stood there wishing I could summon a hole to crawl into, privately squirming under a difficult-to-describe edgy feeling.

"Master, you look so cool," Myusel said from beside me.

"Hrrggaaahh..."

"Master?" She looked at me, her eyes wide.

*Stop it! Just let this end! Make it stop! It's just... super embarrassing somehow!*

I somehow managed not to actually say any of this out loud, though, so other than Myusel, nobody noticed. Every other pair of eyes in the courtyard was on the big screen as a sweet, beautiful young woman appeared.

"Now I've got you... *tee-hee*!" the young-looking high school student announced, her face focused. I'm sure I don't need to say that it was Petralka speaking.

"Oooh!" Impressed voices sounded all around the courtyard.

I guess all this would be surprising for people who had never seen a movie before. The empress was right there in the 2D world in front of them. Petralka and the students from the school might have been used to video images at this point, but to the students' parents, the imperial knights, and

the lizardmen, this was all new.

Incidentally, we made sure to have subtitles for all the dialogue. The magical rings only worked on conversations between two living people. I, for one, didn't necessarily need the subtitles (I knew the script inside and out, after all, plus there were those lessons in the Eldant language from Myusel), but the members of the JSDF wouldn't get what was being said. The subtitles were meant to help with that.

Not only that, but when Japanese soldiers appeared on-screen and spoke in their native language, I saw what appeared to be Eldant-language subtitles on screen. They looked hand-written; most likely, they had been scanned directly from Eduardo's script. That had to be Minori-san's doing (if you wanted to call it that) as well. Talk about your attention to detail. She was a woman of many talents.

"Look at that..."

"Wow..."

Truth be told, I wasn't sure whether anyone not directly involved with the production effort actually understood the story or not. They were just completely overwhelmed by the first movie they had ever seen—the quantity of information, the realism of it.

But then...

"Arrrrgh," I groaned, putting my head in my hands.

This was terrible.

What was terrible? The acting, specifically.

The dialogue, in particular. We couldn't have looked more like a bunch of amateurs reading from a script if we had tried.

"Lookit! There I am!" I heard Elvia exclaim excitedly when she first appeared on-screen, but she grew progressively quieter over the next several minutes. She was probably experiencing what I had felt during that opening scene.

Myusel. Loek. Romilda. The JSDF soldiers. And everyone else who had acted in the movie: we all seemed to notice it. Other than the part that consisted of the leaked soccer clip, we all looked very, very strange. Just like we did now: some people looked at the ground; others even covered their ears. I wasn't one to judge—I had practically turned around, unable to look directly at the screen.

Even Myusel, who had so kindly dubbed me "cool" when I first showed

up, couldn't stop fidgeting after the first scene where she appeared. It was too dark to be sure, but I suspected she was red up to her ears.

And finally...

*"All who would threaten the peace of this beautiful land shall be opposed by the magical girl, Bel!"*

"Gyaaa

Petralka bellowed. Minori-san and I sighed in unison.

At any rate...

Several days later.

As usual, I went to the castle before school to make my report to the empress.

Also as usual, Myusel, Minori-san, and I were admitted to the audience chamber.

But...

“Petralka?”

When I looked up after offering my initial bow, I could only frown in confusion at what I saw.

The empress was sitting on her throne, looking hideously depressed and tired. She rested her arm on the armrest and her chin on her hand; her lips opened just enough to let out a lengthy sigh.

“What... What’s wrong?”

Was the country in some kind of trouble?!

My panicked thoughts were interrupted not by Petralka, but by Garius, who stood beside her. “As a matter of fact,” the knight said, “we’ve found ourselves in a rather... unexpected situation.”

“U-Unexpected? Situation?”

What could it possibly be? I swallowed nervously, and Garius went on, sounding tired.

“The movie, which was officially sealed away, is currently enjoying great popularity among the populace.”

“Come again...?”

“The dance, to be specific...”

“Er... You mean that thing where Petralka gets her groove on at the end?”

“That’s correct.” Garius nodded.

I knew we had shot such a scene, but with the viewing party interrupted halfway through, there shouldn’t have been anyone outside the production staff who knew about it.

As if to answer this exact question, Garius said, “It so happens that we were too late to stop the showings in town.”

“Oh, I... I see.”

“I’m sure you do. The film played all the way through there. What’s more, the abrupt nature of the showings meant many people missed the beginning of the movie. There was a near riot among those insisting that they be shown the start of the film.”

As Garius told it, although talk of the “otaku culture” so popular among the nobles had started to filter down to the common people, very few commoners had as yet had any chance to experience it for themselves. All they knew, essentially, was that the nobles were importing *something* from abroad and having a grand old time with it.

And then what should come along but the showing of our film?

To top it off, the actors were mostly people from the Holy Eldant Empire, so it was much easier to understand than the average otaku production, which often went over people’s heads. Since this was the first movie any of these people had ever seen, they didn’t have any sense that the acting was bad—instead, they embraced it wholeheartedly.

“Even a chance to see Her Majesty the Empress is unusual among the commoners,” Garius said, and at this point even he couldn’t suppress a sigh.

Notwithstanding certain dictatorships, in many kingdoms and other countries run by centralized political power, the ruler was a figure generally accorded absolute respect by their subjects. Hence, the people would be thrilled by any opportunity to see that ruler in person.

And if that ruler was as pretty and adorable as Petralka, and if that opportunity to see her involved her running and jumping and dancing and wearing moderately revealing clothing—well, who wouldn’t be on board?

“Granted the film was suppressed by imperial order, it would still not do to punish people who only wish to show reverence to their empress. Hence... ahem... showings have been going on nonstop for the past several days.”

“Grrrrrrr,” growled Petralka.

“Indeed, more than a few people have learned the dance in question and have begun performing it themselves.”

“Ah...”

*I guess some things are the same in every country.*

Personally, I felt a great affection for the people of the Holy Eldant Empire well up in my heart. Petralka, on the other hand, very much didn't —for her, it was humiliation on a national scale. And because people were doing it out of respect for her, she couldn't even punish them for it.

"Others are agitating for a sequel..." Garius said, his voice thick with irony.

"Absolutely not," Petralka said softly.

As for me, though, when this conversation started, I had been convinced something terrible had happened. To find out that this was all she was upset about brought a smile of relief to my face. Even in the grip of total embarrassment, Petralka was somehow adorable.

"Well, hey, why not?"

A dancing, singing, idol of an empress. In my mind, I pictured Petralka at the center of a huge arena, wearing a sparkly dress, belting out a pop ballad into a microphone and snapping off dance moves as the audience watched. *Yeah! I could go for that!*

"You dog, Shinichi, you rat—!" Petralka stared daggers at me. "Was it not you who said we would never do another movie, anyway?"

"Well, uh, yeah, I guess."

"And regardless, there are things we must attend to. Imperial duties."

Petralka lifted her chin from her hand and leaned toward me. Gripping the armrests with both hands, she straightened her legs and frowned. I saw there the (loli) empress I knew: imposing, elegant, yet somehow impossible not to like. It was as if the girl who had thrown a tantrum about the end of filming didn't exist.

"Speaking of which," Petralka said. "What do you have to report to us today?"

"Er, right, uh, let's see here..."

I thought over what I had prepared to talk about back at the mansion. The progress of classes at school, the amount and timing of new otaku goods that would be imported, the selection and translation of otaku stuff to be exported to other countries on this side of the wormhole—and on and on. As usual, I summarized all this for her. A detailed written report would be sent later.

"And that's all I've got."

"Mm."

“.....Well, I guess I’ll show myself out.”

“And none too soon. We also have a great deal of business awaiting us.”

Petralka’s tone was one of genuine annoyance—and yet, there was no dark note under her voice. I bowed, still smiling in relief, then exited the audience chamber with Myusel and Minori-san. *I think she’s gonna be all right.* Setting aside our collective distaste for the outcome of our efforts, actually filming the movie had been an excellent change of pace.

I was about to head off for school when I heard Garius behind me.

“Shinichi.”

This was unusual. He had followed us out of the audience chamber.

“Yes? Is something the matter?” Maybe there was something they forgot to tell me.

Garius stopped in front of me and the girls. After a moment he said, “I thank you.”

“Huh...?”

“Since the end of filming, Her Majesty has been visibly more engaged in her political duties. And she has not shown any sign of trying to run away. If anything, she is even more accepting of herself as empress than ever before.”

All I could think to say was, “Well, that’s what’s important.”

It had looked pretty close for a while there—I couldn’t exactly smirk and say “Told you so.” Not that I would have anyway.

“It’s thanks to what you said, Shinichi,” Garius told me, and for some reason he was suddenly clasping my hand.

“Oh, I don’t think...” I was smiling and trying to sound humble when my cheeks twitched with a peculiar thought.

*Why are you holding my hand so tight? How can you be so relaxed with your face so close to mine?* I prayed it was just my imagination that Minori-san, observing all this from close distance, appeared to be almost jumping for joy.

“It wasn’t really my idea,” I said with a pointed glance at Minori-san.

Garius let go of me and turned to her with a small nod. “Naturally, Minori Koganuma, you have my gratitude as well. Your words were surely the seed of this change.”

“I was only doing my duty as a servant of Her Majesty,” Minori-san said with a bow, her expression appropriately respectful. It was moments like

this that I realized what a good fit she was for the JSDF.

But there was no question that she was also a very attractive woman.

“Well, then...”

“Indeed.”

We left without further interruption, Garius watching us go.

How do I put this? I know this whole thing started as a stab in the dark at cleaning up a leaked video. And I know it wasn’t easy. And I know a dragon showed up and almost killed us all. But as they say, all’s well that ends well.

“You’ve done good work, sir,” Myusel whispered from beside me, almost as if she could read my thoughts.

“Thanks,” I said. “I think so, too.” I gave a big yawn, but an even bigger smile.

□□□□□

To Be Continued...

# Afterword

Hullo! Light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 4 of *Outbreak Company*.

We've had Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia on the cover already, so I sort of figured Minori-san would be next, and cooked up a story meant to feature her—but before I knew it, it had turned into a Petralka story. And then there she was on the cover, again. Poor Minori-san. Maybe you really can't get on the cover after you turn twenty? Are adult women a no-go, even if they have glasses and huge boobs and a baby face?

Then again, Yuugen-shi's Petralka is adorable (if I may say so myself), so I guess it works out. To those who say they prefer covers with Myusel, I hope the color pages here will soothe (?) your disappointment. This is our first glimpse of her with a ponytail.

By the way, in order to make sure the story clicked along smoothly for this volume, I had to knowingly tell a number of lies, mostly about movie production. Anyone involved in independent film production was probably shouting, "The hell?! That's not the way it works!" all throughout this volume. Please just laugh it off.

On that note, in a past life, I was involved in some independent moviemaking myself, and it so happened that I had to act in the films as well. I was an assassin one time, an arms dealer another, a father forced into thievery when his construction business hit a dead end, and so on. I often go out in public wearing sunglasses and a street-punk jacket; consider it a tradition (?) from that part of my life.

I guess that counts as a kind of cosplay, doesn't it?

This book is scheduled to come out in September, and in November a manga version of the series is slated to begin. I've already seen the rough draft for Chapter 1, and I think it looks really good. It follows the novel, but

scenes are arranged and presented a little differently, in a really interesting way. I think it'll really grab people. I hear it's going to be serialized in *good! AFTERNOON* magazine. If you've been enjoying the novels, I hope you'll check it out.

Now, then.

With light novels, you never really know what's going to sell until it's actually out there. And if it doesn't sell (especially the first volume), then no matter how emotionally invested the author may be, it can get canceled right out from under him. There was a possibility that, on that logic, this series would end after two volumes.

Thankfully, the novels have continued to sell well, and I've been given dispensation from my editors to continue the series for the foreseeable future.

That's given me leeway to start thinking about character and plot development over the somewhat longer term, and in this volume along with the next couple, I'm hoping to plant some seeds that will bear fruit later on. What kind of fruit? Keep reading to find out!

Things have been pretty quiet and slice-of-life-ish for the last several volumes, so in the next book, or maybe the one after that, I'd like to do something with a bit more drama.

I hope you're looking forward to it as much as I am. (Note to my editor: I promise I'll start working on the actual plot tomorrow.)

Hope to see you again for Volume 5!

8/6/2012 Sakaki Ichirou

# Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter One: The Melancholy of an Empress

Chapter Two: Magical Girl

Chapter Three: The Party's Over

Chapter Four: No Business Like...

Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 5 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

# Copyright

Outbreak Company: Volume 4
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 Ichiro Sakaki
Illustrations by Yuugen

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2012 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: June 2018